



WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS

English gardener
has **best of both**
worlds in Marco
Island

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Maintaining
Mountview Cemetery
in Billings is a job
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Chris “Babe”
Predella is Living
the **Dream**

Babe’s Lawn Care
provides full-service
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to 200 customers

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crew supervisor, Carlos Cilliano



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WALKER TALK

Comparing Equipment

My writing has purposefully been reserved for topics besides promoting the Walker Mower.

With this column I will digress a little bit and look at the opportunity to compare the differences in zero-turn riding mowers. There are some real differences, and it would be beneficial for buyers to make the comparisons and understand the differences before purchasing. Since the beginning, the Walker, with its deck mounted out front (front-mount deck), has stood apart from a market flooded with the mid-mount style mowers, and offers many unique advantages. A well-versed dealer's salesperson can point out the differences in the showroom and during a demonstration.

Here at the factory, we have recently had the opportunity to compare eight different competitive mowers with the Walker Mower. It is part of the new sales training program (see page 18). Having competitive machines at the factory is a new experience for us. We have avoided having other mowers around here because we wanted to use a "clean sheet of paper" for our design. But with sales training, it has been very interesting to make the comparisons with other riding mowers and to be able to show our salespeople the differences and advantages of the Walker. The Walker was "different for the right reasons" when it was designed, and it is still a unique, original product.

It has never been our idea that the Walker Mower was going to fit the needs of every customer; sometimes it is not the right machine for the job. But clearly there is a group of customers where the Walker not only fits, it is the better machine. The following is a list of highlights for the Walker Mower that should be used in comparing with other mowers. A side-by-side demonstration of the Walker and a competitive machine "on the property" is the best way to make these comparisons, so a Walker Mower dealer will need to make the arrangements.

- A beautiful, smooth, high-quality mowing job, following ground contours and rolling terrain
- Responsive, precise, fingertip steering with separate forward speed (cruise) control
- Close-up trimming with front-mount deck and precise handling
- Comfortable seating position and great view of mowing area
- Quick, agile maneuvering (saves time on the job)
- Balance and traction for safely operating on slopes and hills
- Easy access to the mower deck and power train for maintenance

Notice that price was not mentioned in the comparison. Walker is not intended to be the low-price leader. Our family intends to design and build equipment that we would like to own ourselves. Our personal tastes are for equipment that is unique, high-quality, durable and valuable, and necessarily costs a little bit more. **WT**

Bob Walker

Bob Walker, President



'Living the Dream'

Babe's team. The owner tells customers he works for his employees and not the other way around.

Chris "Babe" Predella is 28 years old. His company, Babe's Lawn Care, in Brimfield, Massachusetts, employs 11 people, fields five crews, and offers full-service landscape management to 200 customers. He does snow removal, and prior to the first snowfall delivers 300 full cords of firewood to customers. To make life even more interesting, this year he purchased a 15-acre plot of land with an office and garage.

Despite the "moving parts," long hours and hard work, the owner says "I'm living a dream", one that began when his grandfather drove him to a local hardware store when he was 11 years old. "I had been mowing a few of my neighbors' lawns and my grandfather thought it was time I had my own mower," Predella recalls. "I purchased a 22-inch Murray

push mower and proceeded to mow seven lawns that year."

Predella continued to grow his business throughout junior and senior high school while working part-time at a local collision shop. A Craftsman rider, along with a truck and trailer to haul around his equipment, gave revenue a boost. The additional income also gave the young entrepreneur some food for thought as he headed off to college.

"I left after my freshman year," he relates. "It drove me crazy knowing that while I was sitting in class I could be making money instead."

BIGGEST AND BEST MOVE

Predella doesn't regret leaving school early. However, he says it wasn't the best move he ever made. Purchasing a Walker Mower was. That happened

in 2006 when he was 21 years old. "I saw the machine, a 26-hp EFI model with a 42-inch GHS deck, at Preco Power Equipment in nearby Wilbraham. I knew it was the perfect fit for my properties. Yet I was nervous; it was a large investment for a young kid. I called my father and mentioned that I wanted the mower. When I told him it sold for around \$13,000, he said, 'WHOA!'"

His dad, however, wasn't a business partner, only an advisor, so the young contractor had the last say. He filled out a credit application. It was approved and he took home the first of what would later become part of a five-Walker Mower fleet, comprised of all the same models.

"The Walker Mower allowed me to give customers a beautiful cut," adds Predella. "They love the stripes and tell me so, especially if I use my lone



Chris "Babe" Predella left college early to start his business. He says, "It drove me crazy knowing that while I was sitting in class I could be making money instead."

Dixie Chopper on their property for a day. Every mower has an application and I almost exclusively use the Dixie Chopper for wide areas. It's fast, but it doesn't leave lines. The Walker Mowers are ideal for my high-end residential properties, yet they are versatile enough so I can use them on almost everything else from hospitals and office complexes to HOAs."

MOVING UP

For two years after buying his first Walker Mower, all Predella did was mow lawns. He hired a good friend to operate a string-line trimmer and soon purchased a second mower to keep pace with customer numbers.

A third mower and another crew followed. From there he kept growing,

providing crisp lines and, more importantly, good customer service. "It has been a natural progression," Predella adds. "Mowing led to a mulch service. Customers wanted enhancement, too, so now two of my five crews install landscapes, including pavers and other hardscape elements."

The company subs out the heavy digging, along with lawn care and irrigation installation and maintenance, to area contractors with whom it has had a long history. To facilitate a firewood business,



Office manager Gabrielle Austin keeps Babe's office running smoothly.

Babe's purchased a wood processor with a partner. "It is a huge machine," says Predella. "You can position nearly 10 trees on a deck and it splits them at a rate of 1.5 cords per hour."

It's all part of working smarter and not harder, he emphasizes. It's a philosophy that brought a GPS system on-board trucks this year to economize routes and previously encouraged him to hire an office manager.

He explains, "My mother worked for an insurance company and when the business started to grow, I asked her if she would consider working for me, at least part time. I couldn't pay her enough initially, but within a year I approached her again. She finally agreed to join the team and worked with me for two years."

GROWTH FORMULA

His mother retired last year. To keep the position within the family, Predella hired his girlfriend's mother, Gabrielle Austin, to be office manager. "Both my mom and Gabrielle have done a great job keeping the office running smoothly," he emphasizes. "All my employees, including long-time crew supervisor Carlos Ciliano, have been instrumental to my company's growth."

"I called my father and mentioned that I wanted the mower. When I told him it sold for around \$13,000, he said, 'WHOA!'"

"I have great employees," Predella continues. "I try to treat them well, pay them well, and be there with them on job sites. In fact, I tell my customers I work for my employees and not the other way around. If they need me to do something, I'm there."

He notes, too, that having quality equipment and keeping it clean makes a statement to his employees, just as it does to his customers. His lineup

today is extensive. In addition to mowers and other lawn maintenance equipment, Babe's operates eight trucks (all black and lettered) and two Bobcat skid-steer loaders, along with the wood processor and a mulch truck and blower, something he recently purchased to grow that service offering.

"I won't buy new equipment until a previous purchase is paid for in full," Predella adds, not to say he isn't above

taking a risk here or there. The wood processor and mulch truck were costly but have more than paid for themselves, and he expects his new property, on the main road between Sturbridge and Brimfield, to facilitate growth.

"I have enough space to stay at this location forever," he concludes. "I have plenty of room for my equipment and landscaping materials, and someday I would like to start selling pavers, bricks, and virtually everything a customer would need for a landscape project."

Babe's owner says he wouldn't be where he is today without his Walker Mowers. But his dreamscape and future would be less bright, as well, without his employees, family, suppliers and subcontractors, customers, and some old friends who were among his first workers, all of whom have played key roles along the way. **WT**



Left: Babe with crew supervisor, Carlos Ciliano, on one of five Walker Mowers, all the same model.

Below: A recently purchased mulch truck is part of Babe's working smarter and not harder attitude.



The Evolution of Walker Users

As a Walker Mower user and reader of *Walker Talk* magazine, you've lived the story and read about others who've done the same. Chances are you started out mowing lawns very early in life. Your first customers were your neighbors. Obtaining a driver's license allowed you to branch out of the neighborhood while in high school, and later, after graduation, you may have immediately hung your own shingle. If not, maybe college called, or you tried your hand at another career and even worked for another contractor prior to starting your own company.

After hiring a friend or two to help grow the business and landing a few higher-end residential properties, a customer, possibly a company president, asks you to maintain his commercial property. You do, and others follow, with requests to provide additional services. Your company begins to target commercial accounts that want, or even demand, full service. You take on more employees, buy some construction-type equipment and vehicles, and add new crews.

A bigger facility is in your future and you may even be considering adding a satellite or branch location. While the road has opened up new growth oppor-

tunities, it has also raised more than a few obstacles. The most successful Walker Mower users take advantage of the former while learning quickly how to surmount challenges.

GROWING PAINS

Twelve years ago, Michael's Complete Lawn Care in Wichita, Kansas (*Walker Talk* 39), was generating roughly \$400,000 in sales annually with a couple of mowing crews and four or five people. Today, owner Michael Ackerman sends out five mowing crews, along with two landscaping crews, enhancement crews, and lawn care crews.

He identifies four growth levels that have come, each with its own unique set of challenges. "Before we reached \$1 million in sales, several friends were on my payroll," he relates. "Now I have just one. As we grew, it became more difficult to retain friends in a business environment."

Michael Ackerman has added parking lot sweeping to his service offering and now shares space with another landscape contractor.



After reaching the \$1 million plateau, systems and cash flow become more important, Ackerman adds, along with the need to delegate responsibilities. “At the \$2 million to \$3 million levels, more regulations followed, and insurance costs skyrocketed with more equipment, more employees and more exposure.

“I found it necessary to have formal safety and training programs in place,” he adds, noting that employees are now required to become certified before operating specific equipment.

To help delegate responsibility, Ackerman created division-level managers and recently added a sales manager. His father, who joined the company in 2001, maintains the facility and equipment.

Possibly a function of growth, Ackerman found that productivity levels, especially among maintenance crews, were not keeping pace with budget demands. He implemented a new system last July, paying crew members per job instead of per hour. So far, so good, he says.

PAIN RELIEF

Foothills Landscape Maintenance in Windsor, Colorado (*Walker Talk* 35), offered maintenance service only to residential customers for the first three or four years it was in business. Over the next 10 years, partners Nate Caldwell and Shane McCoy orchestrated a move into the commercial market, grew employee rolls to more than 60, and added a myriad of services, not to mention opening a new branch and later selling it.

“As you grow, you get more headaches; it’s that simple,” says Caldwell. “One big one for most contractors is spring cash flow, but by far our biggest one is labor. As the economy improves it becomes more difficult to retain good employees.”

Last year, he noted that his company filed an average of 2 to 2.5 W2 forms per position, which put pressure on both growth and training. Safety takes an even higher priority with employee turnover, and with 30 trucks on the road every day, accidents can happen. “Company-

wide safety meetings and safety policies have become mandatory,” Caldwell emphasizes.

As he points out, there’s no easy and direct way to solve the labor dilemma. It slowed what had been a healthy double-digit growth and likely was partially the impetus for selling a three-year-old branch location in Cheyenne, Wyoming. “As companies grow, I believe owners naturally learn to lean more on suppliers, too,” Caldwell adds. “They can help in many ways by delivering supplies directly to a site, delivering parts, and so forth. The key is to treat them as partners and avoid beating them up on price.”

Jason Fawcett was 20 years old when he appeared in *Walker Talk* 26. At the time, he wore two hats: one as a professional firefighter and the other as owner of Elizabeth River Lawn & Landscape in Suffolk, Virginia. His small, two-crew company has grown more than ten-fold since then, and the now former firefighter operates three locations.



Jason Fawcett created a golf course division that manages an 18-hole course near his office.

Speaking from experience, he says the root of all evil is growing too fast. “As you evolve, you need to manage growth,” Fawcett emphasizes. “Saying ‘no’ isn’t a bad thing.” His company has transitioned from maintaining all residential properties to providing full-service landscape management to commercial establishments.

He notes two challenges associated with growing fast: equipment expenditures and travel time. To contain equipment costs, his company recently instituted two shifts: one from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. and the other from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. Two small satellite locations can be managed efficiently, and they cut down average travel time from 45 to 25 minutes.

OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND

Although working primarily in the commercial market, Fawcett says he still does some work for homeowners and, more recently, created a golf course division to manage an 18-hole course near his office. “It’s kind of exciting,” he adds. “We manage the entire course, from providing turf care and maintaining the fairways, to setting cups and mowing the greens.” He has also started a consulting business, the Fawcett Consulting Group.

The other two contractors have also found opportunities in slightly different areas. Foothills, for example, now provides an erosion control service and manages ponds to control algae. The latter allows the partners to take advantage of their degrees in fish and wildlife biology.

To broaden its full-service offering, Michael’s Complete Lawn Care has added parking lot sweeping. More recently, the company moved to a new location where it shares space with another landscape contractor. “The move gives us a better location and more room,” says Ackerman. “We also rent equipment from one another and subcontract a few services. Our company provides lawn care service for them while they perform our irrigation installation.”

It’s not uncommon for Walker users to start the same way and face many of the same challenges as they evolve. Every company is unique, though. At some point, successful companies surmount the challenges, assume the personality and strengths of their owners, and take advantage of new market opportunities.

WT



English Gardener Has Best of Both Worlds

When Simon Padgett moved to Marco Island, Florida, from England to start Multiskill Lawn and Garden Services, he had a few surprises in store. Back home, landscapes are not bombarded by hurricane salt spray, and spiral white flies couldn't infest palm trees that don't grow there. He didn't expect to see so much competition in the marketplace. And doing business here? Well, in his words, "You have an incredible bureaucracy that creates all sorts of obstacles."

Yet, six years after purchasing a small company for \$250,000, this entrepreneur has established a great reputation in nearby Naples where a few of his 160 properties are among some of the most iconic along the Gulf Coast.

"I didn't know a pine tree from a palm tree when I bought the business," exclaims Padgett, who moved his family to the U.S. on an E-2 Visa. "Fortunately, I have no ego and served up many questions to contractors who were more than willing to help me out."

He says he was a bit lucky in other ways, as well. One of his first customers introduced him to an individual who owned a few upscale properties. Padgett won the accounts, and word of mouth gave his young company a nice boost. The new contractor also inherited a Walker Mower from the previous business owner.

"Back in England, gardeners would likely use a reel mower to maintain the kind of lawn you see around here," he emphasizes. "But not in Naples where properties are too big. I have four Walker Mowers, including a model Super B and a MT that deliver a mowing job as close to a reel as one can get with a rotary mower."

The Super B, faster than the MT and equipped with a 52-inch rear-discharge/mulching deck, gives him the ability to efficiently mow wide areas. The MT, with a 42-inch deck, is perfect for more tightly landscaped areas and backyards where gates can be problematic for larger decks.

"We mulch everything," he adds. "The Walker Mowers are compact and they

Four Walker Mowers "deliver a mowing job as close to a reel as one can get with a rotary mower."

are not as heavy as most mowers on the market, which is good because we get so much rain here. The deck doesn't bounce, but floats instead, and the machines are reliable. Like most contractors, I cannot afford downtime."

BEACH PARTY

Multiskill provides full-service landscape management with only three employees and a few subcontractors who provide irrigation and lawn care services. Not all of the company's 100-plus properties require maintenance service every week, which allows employees to work four 10-hour days.

Their schedule depends on the weather and client expectations. Says Padgett, "Last year, one of our clients hosted a big birthday bash. She asked us to rake the beach so it would look like a huge sand trap. We did, but it was no small task, especially since the stretch in

question was quite long and the beach was open to the public.”

Despite some of the challenges, including a restriction on fertilizer use from June through October, Padgett enjoys working in this country and the opportunities it presents. “In England, I worked for my father’s property renovation firm. It was interesting work, as we renovated buildings that averaged somewhere around 300 years old. After working for him 16 years, I started a small development company and bought and sold homes.”

He eventually tired of the country’s high tax rate, roughly 70 percent of his income, and the weather, which he called “dreary.” Having vacationed several years in Marco Island, he and his wife, Victoria, decided to make a more permanent move to the area. The E-2 Visa gave them the opportunity, allowing nonresidents to obtain temporary residency as long as they are business owners.



Having an E-2 Visa puts additional pressure on business owners to work a little harder and smarter, says Simon Padgett.

Padgett notes that the E-2 Visa, which has to be renewed every two years, comes with strict requirements that put additional pressure on business owners who have to work a little harder and smarter.

QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

The company’s original business model called for multiple crews, a strategy that now takes a back seat to a focus on quality. “I believe there’s an opportunity here for detail-minded landscape contractors,” says the owner, looking around the four-acre property his crew is tidying up. “So my plan now is to be more of a gardener and less of a typical landscape contractor.

“I enjoy the detail work, and the jobs are slightly less competitive,” Padgett continues. “In fact, I’ve lost contracts for as little as \$10 a month. “It’s a matter of quality or price. If a customer wants quality, then price generally becomes less of an issue. The best customers, of course,



Upscale properties like this one in Naples come with their own sets of challenges.



are those who appreciate your work and understand the value they receive for their dollar.”

Upscale properties come with their own sets of challenges, he adds quickly. “It’s very difficult in this climate to get every element looking great at the same time. With so much landscaping, any issue can be a big deal. For example, the spiral white fly infestation required every palm tree on site to be injected. You also need veteran employees who are familiar with the landscape. One cannot put casual labor on most high-end properties without having issues.”

“It’s very difficult in this climate to get every element looking great at the same time ... One cannot put casual labor on most high-end properties without having issues.”

Multiskill’s maintenance supervisor, John Gordon, has been with the company three years. “Employees are motivated by money and praise,” Padgett emphasizes. “I believe I’m fair in both areas. It also helps to have the company owner working alongside. Although I’ve always enjoyed the physical aspect of this work, it can become taxing, especially during the hot summer months.”

In some ways, this English gardener has the best of both worlds. The family still enjoys their home in Marco Island, and they can stay there year-round as long as Multiskill remains in the black. Talk about having a profit incentive, one that gives Simon Padgett just one more reason to have a solid business plan and work it effectively. **WT**

Simon Padgett mulches everything, and the Super B with 52-inch deck gives him the ability to mow wide areas.

A Job That Never Ends



Maintaining a cemetery can be one of the toughest applications for any mower. It not only has to maneuver in between and around headstones, but cemetery grounds are notoriously bumpy as graves deteriorate over time. When the cemetery is located in Montana where winters can be difficult, having mowers that can do double-duty snow removal is important as well.

Finding a mower that was both agile and flexible became a high priority for Lee Stadtmiller soon after he became manager of the Mountview Cemetery in Billings. The former funeral director was well acquainted with the cemetery, but not with all of the nuances associated with maintaining it.

“My predecessor employed a fleet of five belly-mount mowers because the tractor platform could accommodate

Lee Stadtmiller, cemetery manager, looked for a mower that was both agile and flexible.

several attachments,” he relates. “The machines, though, were not very agile and the belly-mount configuration left a lot of work for push mower operators. In fact, it took 12 working days to completely mow the cemetery. You have to understand, they had plenty of ground to cover. The cemetery is located on



Billings Mountview Cemetery has more than 23,000 grave sites. The entire cemetery is irrigated.

65 acres and features approximately 2 million square feet of turf and more than 23,000 grave sites.”

PAYING THE PRICE

When Stadtmiller was hired 14 years ago, one of the first things he did that fall was to fertilize the grounds, something cemeteries rarely if ever did, he remarks. “I paid the price,” he adds. “Next spring, five days before Memorial Day, the grass jumped and there was no way our mowing crew could keep up. We had mowed the cemetery three days prior to Memorial Day, but on the day itself, it looked like it hadn’t been mowed in two weeks.

“My boss wasn’t happy and neither were several people within the community,” Stadtmiller continues. “I quickly tried out several different mowers, looking for something that was as flexible as the current mowers but more agile.”

Enter the Walker Mowers. The cemetery replaced the five belly-mount mowers with four Walker Mower diesels. Today, equipped with four different-sized mulching and side-discharge decks, the machines have reduced mowing time from 12 days to three, and they’ve virtually eliminated push mowers and seriously reduced string-line trimming.

The newest addition is the Model Super B. Stadtmiller says his next one will be another Super B, thanks to its speed and slightly higher profile that improves operator visibility. A debris blower, blade, snow thrower and broom attachment provide the same year-round flexibility that accompanied the previous mowers.

MOWING SCIENCE

Mountview Cemetery is comprised of two cemeteries: an older one called Billings and the newer Mountview on an adjacent site. The primary difference between the two, not counting age (in the Billings cemetery, some graves date back to 1882), is planning. Headstones and markers in the new section are required to be granite, and they are evenly spaced so mower operators can go up one row, mow around three corners of a stone along the way and then return on the other side mowing in a straight line, catching the final corner.

The process is slightly more problematic in the Billings section where stones of all different configurations and composition are placed rather haphazardly. But mowing was only one challenge the new cemetery manager faced.

“When I came to Montana in the late 1970s, caskets were still being delivered to funeral homes in wood boxes. These same boxes were also used as the casket’s outer container. Over time, both the casket and wood box would deteriorate, creating a sink hole. Raising the sunken grave sites was a laborious process that involved removing the sod, hand tamping the grave, filling it in, and then replacing the sod. It was all a cemetery crew could do to raise three graves in a day.

“Initially I had 2,000 graves that needed to be raised,” Stadtmiller continues. “We are not talking about slight divots either, but holes in which one could hide a mower. Since then, we’ve raised somewhere between 9,000 and 10,000 graves. Although the cemetery grounds are far more level than when I came here, they’re still very tough on mowers. You can see the floating deck on the Walker Mowers constantly going up and down to accommodate bumps and dips. Despite the punishment, we schedule a

Four Walker Mowers have reduced mowing time from 12 days to three, and they’ve virtually eliminated push mowers and seriously reduced string-line trimming.

mower change-out every 3,000 hours, but they usually get somewhere between 3,500 and 4,000 hours before we actually trade them in.”

FULL SCHEDULE

In addition to mowing and raising graves, the cemetery’s four full-time employees operate and maintain the irrigation system, prepare graves, attend services, and help maintain some adjacent properties owned by the city. As manager, Stadtmiller oversees the maintenance crew, which also includes four seasonal employees, and then, in his words, “does a little of everything else.”

“I try to comfort grieving families, sell grave sites, and talk people through our website,” he explains. “People can locate friends’ and relatives’ graves right on our website, but not everyone is comfortable

with computers so I often spend some phone time with them.”

When asked how someone gets into this rather unusual line of work, Stadtmiller says it was more of a calling for him than anything else. “I see people during the most difficult times of their lives, and if I can be of some comfort and help to them, that is rewarding to me. Billings is not a big city, either, and I get to know many of our customers and interact with them as they try to get their lives back to normal.”

He notes that the cemetery business has changed dramatically, even within

“I see people during the most difficult times of their lives, and if I can be of some comfort and help to them, that is rewarding to me.”

the 14 years he has been Mountview’s manager. “Cremation has extended the cemetery’s life. It now accounts for roughly 60 percent of our burials, giving us space to accommodate 80,000 burials or more in the future.”

In the meantime, maintenance work goes on all year long and will continue to go on long after Stadtmiller retires. When a customer buys a grave site, the cost also includes maintaining the site in perpetuity. **WT**

Operators mow around three corners of a headstone on one pass, and then catch the final corner on the return trip.



Leaving the ‘Cookie Cutter’ Home

One way to grow is to offer a standard service to all customers, one that saves both time and money. This strategy, however, holds little appeal to Brad Paton, owner of Shades of Summer Landscaping in Hamilton, ON, Canada. In business for only five years, his approach is to adapt service offerings to properties.

“All of our clients expect our precise, trimmed grass edges. Some have an abundance of perennials to be maintained, while others feature unique shrubs for shearing,” Paton notes. “We cannot pull up with a truck and trailer and expect to deliver the same service that we just

provided on another property. The same level of service, yes, but not the same type of service.”

His style aligns perfectly with customers, many of whom have won some of Canada’s most prestigious gardening awards. “My customers expect crews to deliver impeccable service,” Paton emphasizes. “They expect bushes to be precisely trimmed, mowing lines to be straight, and crew members to accommodate special requests.”

The approach may put pressure on the bottom line at times, even inhibit growth, but it also helps to differentiate his company from others.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Prior to launching his company in 2009, Paton worked 17 years for an area landscape contractor. The experience was invaluable, and provided a substantial living. But as manager of the company’s maintenance division, he wasn’t able to fulfill his need to be creative. That changed when a friend/customer posed this question to him: “What’s stopping you from going on your own?” Money was the short answer, but it wasn’t the right answer for the customer who then offered to be a silent partner. They each put up \$50,000, and Shades of Summer Landscaping was born.



Shades of Summer crews share two Walker Mowers, each with high-lift dump attachments.



One of the new owner's first moves was to buy a Walker Mower with a high-lift dump. "The company I had worked for operated six Walker Mowers, and it was the first in the area to purchase the dump attachment," Paton recalls. "Providing maintenance services has changed dramatically, even since I've been in the industry. The high-lift dump is just one example of how companies like Walker Manufacturing have come up with ways to make it easier, in this case on your back. The extra money you pay for something like this pays for itself several times over in time and back relief."

The company's new mower featured a 31-hp, liquid-cooled engine and a 52-inch GHS deck. It was soon followed by a used commemorative model with a 28-hp engine, 48-inch GHS deck, and, of course, a high-lift dump. Three crews share the two mowers, along with two Toro 30-inch walk-behind mowers for particularly hilly or small yards impractical for the Walker Mowers.

"We mow Wednesday through Friday and half of Tuesday," says Paton. "Mondays and Tuesday mornings are reserved for properties that require special detailing, pruning, or even garden



renovations." As a full-service landscape company, Shades of Summer also applies fertilizer, and subcontracts irrigation and stone work. It also designs gardens and installs unique rock water features.

Unique gardens highlight many Shades of Summer properties.



Tracey and Brad Paton provide a customized, personalized service to 60 residential customers.

Given the nature of his 60 residential properties, mowing is only part of the maintenance regimen for Paton. Upon pulling up to a site, half the crew mows and edges while the other half spends time in the gardens. “We make a point to connect with customers, talk about their property, and discuss potential problems and solutions,” Paton explains. “Each property is different and all my customers want to be involved. They want and need to communicate with their contractor, to know what’s going on.” It’s this relationship building and attention to detail that helped kick-start Paton’s new business.

LEAVING PAINS

Prior to starting his own company, the Shades of Summer owner had developed a solid relationship with property owners, many of whom wanted him to continue to maintain their yards. “It was a stretch for some of them initially,” Paton says. “They would be leaving a proven company for a good practitioner, but someone yet untested as a businessperson. The calls I received, though, demonstrate how important it is to build relationships with customers and, of course, provide a service that meets if not exceeds their expectations.

At the end of its first year of operation, Shades of Summer had 25 high-

end residential accounts, likely a few more than its owner anticipated. In fact, one of his first challenges and something he still struggles with is growing too fast.

Overextending a company financially is always a threat during growth spurts, and knowing just when to add another crew is difficult. But, as Paton emphasized, even more important to him was finding the right people to staff a crew and, as the owner, having the time to spend with customers.

“I tell my staff to look at every tree and shrub on the property before they leave it.”

He points to three estate-like properties adjacent to one another. His three crews maintain two of them, and the third one has lobbied for his service. “It’s a beautiful property, too,” says Paton, referring to the one he doesn’t maintain. “But there’s no way we can service it and still provide the personalized service we give to other customers, and that includes spending the requisite time with them.”

Wife, Tracey, acknowledges her husband’s penchant for communicating with customers. “Often, he works late

because he’s spent so much time with customers. It’s not casual conversation, either. He’s truly interested in hearing about their ideas and sharing his with them. It amazes me. I’ve never heard a customer ask him a question he couldn’t answer.”

Relatively new to the profession, Tracey says her biggest frustration is the steep learning curve. “Until this spring, I worked in Toronto as a buyer in the fashion industry. The commute was getting long, anywhere from an hour to more than two hours, depending on the traffic. But I knew my job inside and out, so joining Brad in an industry I didn’t really know has been an adjustment. It’s also very physical work.” She says the passion crew members share about their work has been an eye opener, as well.

Paton acknowledges this passion and adds that there’s more to cutting grass than operating a mower. “I tell my staff to look at every tree and shrub on the property before they leave it. Most customers want their landscape contractors to be educated, identify

potential problems before they become problems, and to work with them to overall enhance their properties.”

Not all property owners share his enthusiasm and sentiments. Some may not want to interact with their mowing contractor or pay a little more to have their properties better maintained. There’s a demand for that service, too, but not something Paton wants to supply. His customers want a company that provides personalized service, whose owner brings in the Walker Mower, but leaves the cookie cutter home. **WT**



What is at the Heart of the Walker Drivetrain?

I have been giving some thought lately to what sets the Walker Mower apart from other mowers. The list gets long, but one thing that jumps out at a tech-minded guy like me is the drivetrain. What makes the mower maneuver the way it does, with responsiveness and precision? What can provide the reliability that is expected in both homeowner as well as commercial uses? Yes, the power plant is important, and whether it is Kohler, Briggs, Kubota, Subaru or any other engine brand, it really comes down to transmitting that power to the drive tires. This needs to be done in the most efficient way possible to leave enough horsepower to run the deck or any attachments.

In the Walker GHS models, this has been achieved over the last 30-plus years using the Eaton Model 7 infinitely variable-speed hydrostatic transmission. By the time the first Walker was being designed, the Eaton Model 7 had already proven itself in the industrial, agricultural, construction and maintenance industries. Its reliable radial-ball piston design, an integrated pump/motor with a single lever control, all in a compact package, made it a great fit for the Walker Mower then as well as today.

One might wonder why an integrated transmission is used, as opposed to a separate pump and wheel motor design like many other mower manufacturers have. That is a good question. Before I answer, let me say that the Hydro-Gear®

transaxle that is used in our MB line also shares the same integrated design as the Eaton transmission. It has an axial piston pump and motor integrated into one assembly. With the Hydro-Gear®, the gear reduction to the axle is also integrated into the same housing. In the early years with the Eaton Model 7 transmission, the Walker final drive was chain-driven, and later, a cast iron gear reduction drive axle replaced the chain drive.

ADVANTAGES OF THE WALKER TRANSMISSION DESIGN

With that being said, let me tell you what we believe to be the advantages of this transmission design as it relates to the Walker drivetrain.

Compact size. Maintaining a consistently small and light footprint on the turf is essential. There is no need for hoses or extensive linkages that take up space and add weight. Space and ease of getting to the components is a great advantage when it comes to maintaining the Walker Mower.

Responsiveness. This type of transmission responds more quickly to control inputs than any other type because the pump and motor are housed together, creating a smaller hydraulic loop. This type of transmission is capable of very precise and consistent speed control resulting in precise and predictable steering and handling. This is really noticeable when operating near the neutral position and into reverse with the Walker.


Input control. This advantage is often overlooked but very important. With one lever per transmission and minimal linkage, the operator can control the speed and direction of each transmission and, in turn, steer and maneuver the mower.

MAINTENANCE TIPS

These transmissions are components that require maintenance and upkeep to achieve the long life they can provide. A quick reminder of what that involves is simple and short, and the following is what we recommend.

Cooling of the hydraulic system is very important, so replace broken cooling fans as soon as possible.

Keep the transmission's cooling fins clean and free of debris, especially the underside that may not be as noticeable at first glance.

Oil level is important, so keep an eye on the level in the reservoir. This is accomplished by holding a light up to the reservoir. Low oil will cause over-heating as well as poor transmission performance. A quick note here: If you notice dirt collecting around the input shaft, or control shaft (or the charge pump on Hydro-Gear®) cover of the transmission, this is a sign of oil leakage. Although it may not seem like a big deal, have it checked by your Walker dealer. There are parts available for these repairs, and a little preventive maintenance early on can prevent costly repairs later. 

Sales School Underway At Factory



Starting in May, a two-day factory sales training program is being offered to Walker salespeople from distributorships and dealerships.

The training takes place at an outdoor park adjacent to the factory with a covered pavilion and training grounds. Students review written materials and take online tests interspersed with live demonstrations of Walker Mowers and competitive machines plus lots of opportunity for hands-on driving and mowing in the park. Other activities include driving an obstacle course at three different times and a factory tour.

Many of the salespeople have shown a marked improvement in their driving and demonstrating skills of the Walker after completing the training. A total of six sessions will be held in the 2013 summer season with approximately 100 participants. The long-term plan is for the training to continue in the summer season in Colorado for some years to come.

Walker Manufacturing has made a significant investment in the sales training facility and program, not only because they believe that more mowers will be sold, but also that customers will receive a better sales experience and product demonstration. A well-trained salesperson will ultimately help customers select the right machine for their job, even if that would be a competitive machine. In the end, a good sales process is the good customer service that Walker wants for their customers.



FACEBOOK PAGE SURGES WITH WALKER FANS

In the past year, Walker has noticed a significant increase in Facebook fans and page activity. This has included some weekly contests to win Walker Ware and Walker LED signs. The fan count has now eclipsed 4,400 and has continued to grow.

"We have known for years that we have an exceptional group of customers who love the product," explains Walker Marketing Manager, Tim Cromley. "And Facebook has helped us to not only be able to have an ongoing dialogue with fans, but also discover even more people who have an appreciation for the product and the company."

Facebook will continue to be a vital part of the Walker marketing plan, and Walker is excited to get to know more fans in this way.



Walker Talk App Being Launched

A new *Walker Talk* mobile app for iPads and Android tablets is now available online. This new app gives readers an opportunity to see *Walker Talk* stories come to life through supporting video and other interactive graphics.

If readers of *Walker Talk* prefer to receive just these electronic updates, they can go to walkermowers.com/subscriptions/walkertalk to submit their request.

The app can be downloaded at the Apple App Store (for iPad) and at Android Google Play (for android tablets) by searching for *Walker Talk Magazine*.



NEW BELGIUM DISTRIBUTOR JOINS WALKER TEAM

Early in 2013, Walker's French-based distributor, Saelen, located in Lille, decided to close their operations in Belgium, and the Walker distributorship was sold to Hilaire Van der Haeghe NV. Based in Wilrijk, Antwerpen, Belgium, the HH company is an independent, family-owned business that has been in operation since 1898 and has 75 years of experience in distributing lawn and garden equipment.

Walker Mowers were first imported into Belgium in 1991. Belgium has turned out to be a great market for Walker and many machines have been put into service since then. With the HH company leading the way, the Belgium market for Walker should continue to grow. Walker Manufacturing looks forward to many years of working together with this new partner in Belgium.

MID-YEAR IMPROVEMENTS FOR MODEL MB

Starting with June production, the Model MB includes several design improvements.

The chassis frame has been changed to raise the PTO drive shaft and reduce the operating angle of the U-joint drive shaft, giving smoother, quieter operation and extending U-joint life.

The transmission drive belt tightener has new geometry, incorporating a torsion spring, and now uses the same belt as the PTO drive (common replacement part).

A gas spring replaces the prop rod to secure the tilt-up body in the raised position.

Finally, for simplicity, the steering lever spring and dampener are combined into one assembly instead of a separate spring and dampener.

NEW DGHS36R DECK A GREAT PERFORMER

The 36-inch GHS deck has been redesigned using reverse-rotation cutting blades (like the DGHS52) and offers a very smooth cut and good clog resistance.

This deck is especially suited to mowing residential-sized properties with tight spaces and rolling landscaped contours; it eliminates scalping and secondary trimming that come with attempting to use a larger deck on this kind of property. The tractor needs to be equipped with narrow drive tires (P/N 5033-6) to provide deck overhang for trimming when using this deck.

OPTIONAL DECK CUFF KIT

A deck cuff has been designed to increase the effective cutting width and productivity of the mower deck by directing grass under the deck that would otherwise be pushed to the outside by the rounded deck skirt. Factory tests have shown an increase in cutting width of 1 to 1.5 inches, depending on grass type and cutting height.

The cuffs are easy installed on three models of GHS decks by ordering one of the following kits: P/N 7704-2 (DGHS36R), 7704-4 (DGHS48, standard rotation only), 7704-5 (DGHS52). Cuffs for the DGHS42 and DGHS48R are not currently available, but may be at a later date after making some design changes and doing additional testing.



OFFSET STEERING HANDLE KIT (P/N 5453-13)

Optional steering lever handles with an offset design provide additional adjustment and a more comfortable operating position for operators with short or long arms; short arms offset aft and long arms offset forward. Easily installed as a direct replacement of existing handles.



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