

DOES YOUR COMPANY HAVE A **STRONG BRAND?**



WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS

Fritz the Gardener

Ron Fritz goes from oil hauler to sought-after “gardener” in Pennsylvania

P. 6

From Wilderness Instructor to Cemetery Sexton

P. 9

Finding Your Passion

Teacher trades textbooks for a pickle ball and a Walker Mower

P. 14

One Family, Two Companies

FROM LEFT: SAM, SCHUYLER AND SETH BINION WITH KYLE GINGERICH (SEATED) OF OKAW PRAIRIE LANDSCAPING & LAWN CARE IN TUSCOLA, ILLINOIS

P. 3



3 Ceiling Is Just a Word

Quick start has Illinois brothers excited about the future of their companies.

6 Be Careful What You Don't Want

Fritz the Gardener is glad he ignored his instincts and started his own full-service landscaping business in Pennsylvania.



9 From Wilderness Instructor to Cemetery Sexton

Idaho duo racks up the hours mowing 12-acre site twice weekly.

12 So What's Your Brand?

How to create a powerful brand that actually helps your business perform better.



14 Turning a Passion into a Profitable Business

Oregon contractor trades teaching career for what he really loves to do.



17 Tech Talk

18 News & Products

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WALKER TALK

Tale of Two Boys

Sometimes things happen in patterns. This last August, within two weeks of each other, we had two 11-year-old boys and their families come to our factory for a visit and a factory tour. One was from Alabama and the other from Pennsylvania. Given a choice on other adventures they might have had, both told their parents they wanted to come to Colorado to visit the Walker factory.



You see, both of these young men are entrepreneurs in progress. One already has a mowing business with a Honda walk-behind mower and the other is making plans to get his business started. Both had done their research about the Walker Mower and had visited the Walker Dealers close to home. As I gave them the factory tour, you could tell they knew a lot about the mower—engine options, deck sizes, attachments and prices for the equipment.

Neither of the boys had operated a Walker Mower. I took them to our sales training area and put them on a Walker. They took right off and began operating the mower just like a pro. They had watched our videos online and knew how to operate the machine. You should have seen the smiles on their faces as they drove the Walker for the first time.

Both of these boys have plans to purchase a Walker Mower in the next few years. Both told me they will build their businesses using the mowers they have at hand and will “earn” their Walker Mower. To me this is very exciting. It is OK for older guys like me to purchase a Walker Mower, but our future in the manufacturing business rests on having the next generation see the opportunity to use a Walker Mower to build their business, setting goals and making plans to become a Walker Mower owner.

Finally, for naysayers who think the next generation is not going to amount to much, there are still great young people being born and growing up to become great citizens of this earth. There are still some great parents (like my parents) who are guiding and encouraging their kids to pursue their dreams. Getting acquainted with two 11-year-olds and their families in August fanned the fire of my optimism. **WT**

Bob Walker

Bob Walker, President

CEILING Is Just a Word

Quick start has Illinois brothers excited about the future of their landscaping and maintenance companies.



Okaw Prairie Lawn Care has 90 maintenance accounts, including a few high-end residential accounts like the one shown here. The team, from left: owner Seth Binion with brother Sam and Jeff Yoder.

In February 2014, brothers Seth and Schuyler Binion were featured in their local newspaper. Pictured with only a wheelbarrow, shovel and rake, they had just launched their new company, Okaw Prairie Landscaping and Lawn Care located in Tuscola, Illinois.

By the end of 2014, the brothers already had 45 maintenance accounts and had pitched their near prehistoric tools for a used Walker Mower and a trailer. A year later, their maintenance accounts had doubled and their landscaping business had grown, as well.

“Family comes first for us. A startup company can create a lot of stress, and we wanted to make sure that business wouldn’t come between us,” explains Seth. “So we essentially launched two companies at the same time. Schuyler, who went to school for landscape design,



Sam Binion puts the GHS Walker Mower through its paces during leaf cleanup.

operates the design/build company. I run the maintenance company.”

Their five-year plan calls for them to eventually purchase some land in town and form a single company. Until that time, they will work out of their homes, occasionally subcontract to one another, and focus on building their book of business.

GROWTH SPURT

Neither of the owners anticipated their fast start. “I expected to plant a few shrubs and to renovate some small landscapes at first,” relates Schuyler. “Instead, I received a couple of substantial hardscape installations. Just this past year, Seth won a bid for a rather high-profile outlet mall, bolstering his growing list of residential and commercial properties.”

Schuyler, who needed more horsepower, soon purchased a used Kubota utility tractor with a bucket loader. Seth has since added two Walker Mowers to his lineup, a lineup that now includes a Model B with a 52-inch side-discharge deck, a Super B with a 60-inch side-discharge deck, and a Model C equipped with a 48-inch GHS deck. Schuyler expects to add a skid steer to his lineup in 2016. Seth has his eyes on a Walker



Schuyler and Kyle Binion (in orange) finish up a hardscaping project.

Model H with a rear-discharge deck.

Despite their fast start, both companies operate with a lean workforce—three in maintenance and two in design/build—for a total of five full-time employees including the owners. They bring on additional part-time help in the summer as work dictates.

The brothers have big plans that likely will outgrow Tuscola and surrounding communities in time. Champaign/Urbana is only 30 miles north, and there’s no question they will go where there’s work.

They confess to having a strong work ethic, something their father and grandfather instilled in them. In fact, their companies’ names honor their grandfather, whose farm was called Okaw

Prairie. Their younger brother, Sam, also works with Seth, and there is potential for more sibling involvement later on since there are eight brothers and two sisters in the family.

SHORT LEARNING CURVE

The Binions didn’t go into business blind, having previously worked for another landscape contractor. They left to start their own company after attempts to buy that company fell short.

Schuyler explains, “Our career paths had reached a dead end. The owner, with whom we are still friends, knew that and offered to sell us his company. But the deal never materialized so we went on our own. It was a big step for us, not so much with the technical aspects of

landscaping and maintenance, but with the business side.”

Marketing, however, was not an issue. Growing up in the area, they had several contacts. After that initial exposure in the newspaper, their relationships generated work for them and word of mouth kept the wheels turning, including those on their Walker Mowers.

“The company we left had Walker Mowers. We liked their cut, their maneuverability and their versatility being able to handle a variety of attachments,” says Seth. “Yes, I have a long list of reasons why we like the machines, but equally important to their features is the service we get from our Walker dealer, Power Plus Equipment in nearby Arthur. From the start, its service department didn’t favor larger companies over us. Owners Dave Stutzman and Paul Yoder gave us the same top-level of service they gave to larger companies even though we only had one machine.”

NO CEILING

Currently, the Okaw Prairie duo have more work than they have resources, but if hard work and desire rule the day, that will change. “We don’t see a ceiling,” adds Schuyler. “Seth and I want to work hard and grow.”

They readily admit that it won’t happen by their efforts alone.

“We’ve been blessed with so many people helping us along the way,” says Seth. “My father co-signed a note with me so we could purchase that first Walker Mower. Thanks to the mall work we won this year and another big project in the works, I should have little problem getting financing for a Model H.

“Our parents and grandparents and siblings, along with our extended families and our church, have all helped out and given us advice. I would be remiss if I failed to say that our faith has played a big role in our success, because it has.”

Schuyler agrees, adding, “Both of us strive to live by the golden rule and always treat people with respect. It’s not only the right thing to do, but it goes

“A startup company can create a lot of stress, and we wanted to make sure that business wouldn’t come between us. So we essentially launched two companies at the same time.”

– Seth Binion

a long way with our customers and our employees.”

Schuyler includes in that list his full-timer, Kyle Gingerich, who happened to be his boss at the previous company. Kyle took a job managing a couple of sandwich shops in Alabama before coming to work for Okaw Prairie. “We’re very fortunate to have him,” adds Schuyler. “He has a ton of experience, knows what needs to be done, and has taken the design work off my table so I can do more selling.”

Seth feels equally confident about his team, with brother Sam and Jeff Yoder.

“Sam is 21 and works hard even though he hasn’t decided yet if he wants to buy into the business. Jeff is a born leader. We also have two other brothers who work for us now when we need extra help. That’s an especially important resource in an industry where good workers are hard to find.”

If there’s a ceiling to their growth, it won’t be for lack of having a good work ethic, the right equipment and support network. The local market and the economy will have something to say about the future, but right now “ceiling” is just a word, not an obstacle. **WT**



Seth Binion (right) with Walker Mower dealer Dave Stutzman from Power Plus Equipment. “They gave us the same high level of service they gave larger companies even though we only had one machine,” Seth tells.

‘Be Careful What YOU DON’T WANT’

Fritz the Gardener is glad he ignored his instincts and started his own full-service landscaping business in Pennsylvania.



“I’m more of a businessman than a landscaper today,” says Ron Fritz.

Ron Fritz never wanted to be in business for himself. After all, there’s too much uncertainty and too much risk. The smoother road ahead would be to continue to drive truck. Then why, one asks, does he own six diesel Walker Mowers, employ 11 people, and operate out of a spacious facility? His answer is pretty straightforward: “Sometimes it’s better to make your own way.”

That’s just what he has done. Fritz the Gardener, as his company is called, offers full service to a wide variety of customers in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Its focus is on retirement communities and HOAs, but also counts a few industrial facilities and residences among clients.

FROM TRUCK TO TURF

Like many landscape contractors, Fritz started out in the residential market. In his case, however, it was landscaping that piqued his interest, not maintenance.

“I was hauling oil out of Lancaster when the company I worked for was bought out,” Fritz recalls. “In between jobs, I did some landscaping and trimming for a co-worker of my wife, Kathy, and later via word of mouth picked up other landscaping jobs. Being raised on a dairy farm, I was accustomed to working outside, and I always enjoyed working with my hands.

“For the next seven years, I continued to drive truck and do landscaping,” Fritz continues. “The day job was four days on

and three off, allowing me to continue to work on the side. In 1992, I took a leap of faith and left my day job. From the very start, though, I was known as Fritz the Gardener because that co-worker had told Kathy she always wanted a gardener named Fritz.”

Eventually, Fritz changed his focus from landscaping to maintenance. With two young children, daughters Krissy and Renee, he wanted more of a family life, and one-off landscaping jobs forced him to spend most evenings selling.

As Fritz’s focus changed, so did his tools. His first mower was a Honda walk-behind. His first rider was a rear-engine John Deere. When Fritz won the job for a large condo 15 years ago, he needed a commercial-grade mower and settled on a Walker Mower “look-alike.”

“The machines didn’t perform that well and I traded them for three liquid-cooled Walker Mowers with 48-inch GHS decks,” says Fritz. “I put a lot of hours on them, probably around 500 a year.”

A burgeoning business soon forced him to move from his farmette outside of Lancaster to a plot in town where he constructed a new 4,500 sq-ft facility. Fritz changed from gas to diesel Walker Mowers at the same time, in part because he was able to use off-road diesel.

MR. EFFICIENCY

The fuel switch was inspired by an ongoing drive to become more efficient. Fritz’s diesel Walker Mowers, still equipped with 48-inch GHS decks, now have mulching decks in the ready, allowing for efficient and easy disposal of clippings when weather and grass conditions permit.

When collecting clippings, an electric dump on his Walker Mowers keeps the machines in the field longer. “Operators pull up, dump, and then move away while lowering the dump box in place,” Fritz explains. “It still amazes me how much work our Walker Mowers do. They are very efficient.”

Fritz points to other efficiencies learned over time. Crews stay within



Ron Erb, a 70-year-old retired equipment dealer, has been working part-time for Fritz the Gardener for five years.

a five-mile radius of the shop, keeping travel time to a minimum. Machines, other tools, and trucks and trailers are assigned to specific crews, making everyone accountable for their equipment.

“I’m always looking for new ways to get the job done,” Fritz relates. “In fact, I purchased an off-road Segway last year. So far, I’ve used it to inspect properties and it comes in handy to apply weed control. I simply strap on the sprayer and off I go. The electric motor is a plus, too, because it’s quiet.”

Back at the shop, there’s enough room to store all of his equipment inside except his trailers. The roof even collects run-off rain in a cistern, used primarily to supply water to mix up spray material, water plant material and wash trucks.

NEVER SAY NEVER

“I never had a grand plan and never even wanted to own a business,” Fritz reiterates. “Be careful what you don’t want.”

Not having a background in landscaping, the reluctant entrepreneur became self-taught. He read books, took several six-week courses offered at Penn State, and worked closely with the extension service.

The education by itself didn’t carry the day for Fritz. Providing excellent service is his passion, something that can apply to any business in any industry. In addition to delivering a quality product for customers, he emphasizes that something as simple as showing up on time, returning phone calls, and having clean trucks and equipment gave his company access to a more high-end clientele.

“Weather permitting, we mow and do landscaping on a set schedule,” Fritz explains. “Crews work on landscape projects Monday and Friday and we mow Monday through Thursday. Fridays are kept short so we can clean trucks inside and out and maintain equipment.”

For challenges, Fritz calls out the weather as one, labor as another. “You can’t do much about the weather,” he says. “But when it comes to employees, it’s important to find people who can adapt to your culture. We’ve been fortunate over the years, having a couple of employees who have worked with us more than 10 years, and we have a retired equipment dealer, Ron Erb, who works for us part-time. You would never know he’s 70 years old. We also employ college students for the summer.

“Still, this work is labor-intensive and

finding good employees always takes a priority,” Fritz adds. “Back at the office, Kathy handles all the book work, including accounts receivables and payables. Without her, I wouldn’t be in business.”

The business has evolved—and so has the owner. “I’m more of a businessman than a landscaper today,” says Fritz. “I made the switch six or seven years ago when I had to spend more time managing the work. Having 11 employees is about as big as I want to get right now. More employees would likely require another level of management. In fact,

“It still amazes me how much work our Walker Mowers do. They are very efficient.”

– Ron Fritz

over the last couple of years, I’ve tried to reign in growth by selling most of my smaller accounts.”

Fritz doesn’t need to advertise and doesn’t even put his phone number on the side of his truck; only the company name is on his truck. “Some new customers complain that they’d had a hard time finding me,” Fritz admits, adding how that’s not all bad. “It virtually pre-qualifies them.” Not a bad position to be in for someone who never wanted to be in business. **WT**



Doing something as simple as showing up on time, returning phone calls, and having clean trucks and equipment gave Fritz the Gardener access to a more high-end clientele.



A newly purchased off-road Segway allows Fritz to quickly inspect properties and even apply herbicides.

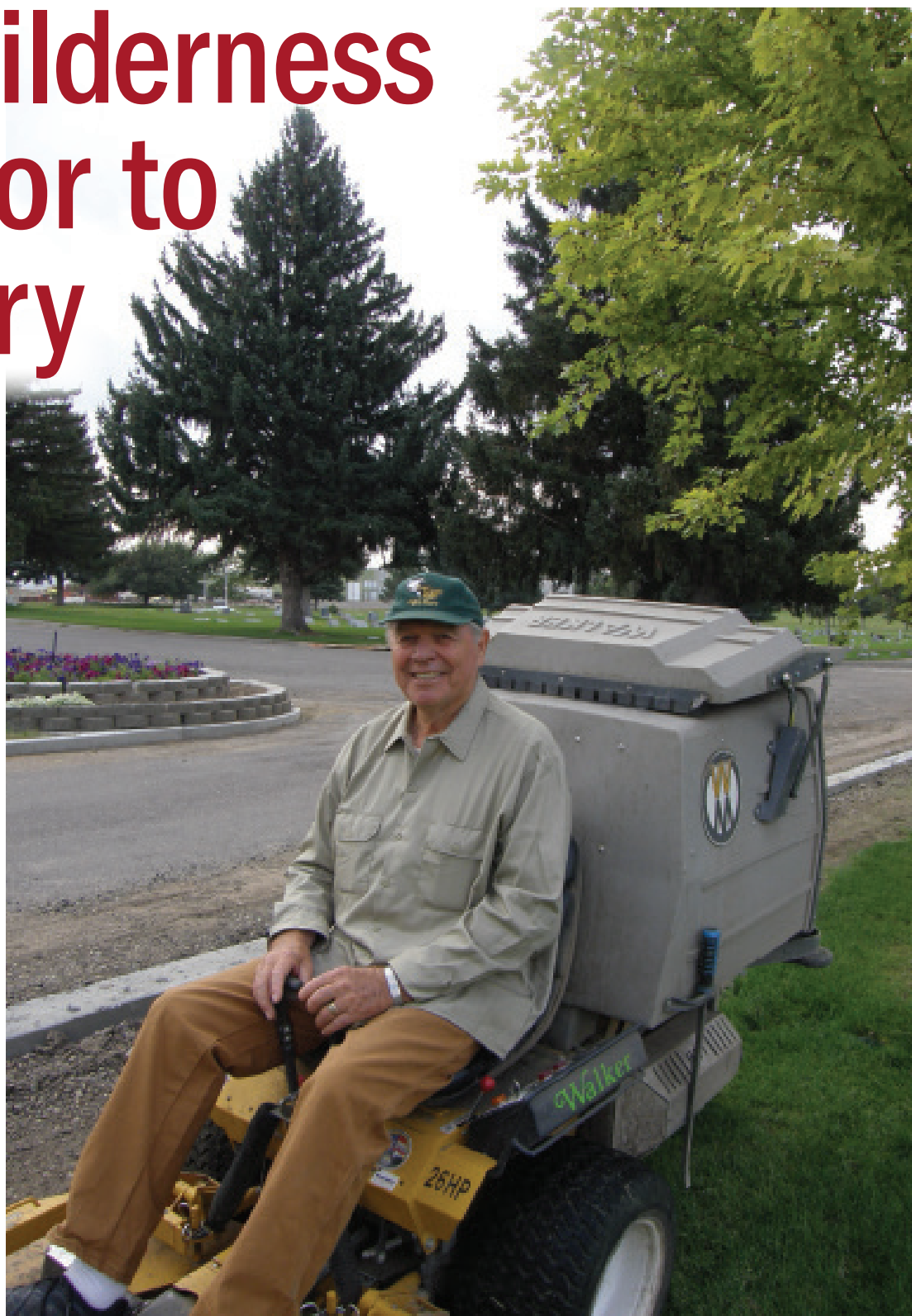
From Wilderness Instructor to Cemetery Sexton

Idaho duo racks up the hours mowing 12-acre site twice weekly.

“**T**here’s a reason you see so many Walker Mowers on trailers around here and why we have three of them,” says Paul Isaacson, sexton for the Wendell, Idaho, cemetery. “They live a long life. In fact, we recently sold one of ours that had 8,000 hours on it to a homeowner for \$1,500. He figured it would last him forever mowing once a week.”

The cemetery has its share of challenges for Isaacson and mower operator Araceli Estrella, but mowing once a week isn’t one of them. Isaacson, on a 26-hp model MT with a 48-inch GHS deck, and Estrella, on a Super B with a 60-inch side-discharge deck, mow the 12-acre site twice weekly from the middle of March through almost the middle of November.

“Together we mow a total of eight hours on Monday and Tuesday and again on Thursday and Friday,” explains Isaacson, who at age 75 has been maintaining the cemetery for 16 years. “That’s



Paul Isaacson’s 16 years with the cemetery were interrupted by a stint as city superintendent, member of the city council, and then mayor.

32 hours a week, every week, until the grass slows down. In fact, one of our two GHS mowers was new this year. By the first week in September, it had already logged 440 hours.”

The mowers with the GHS decks truly get the workout, Isaacson adds. The cemetery has 5,100 plots—2,200 of which are occupied. Isaacson spends most of his mowing time weaving in and out between the headstones.

“That’s where the machine’s out front deck and maneuverability pay off,” says Isaacson. “Still, there are some serious challenges, not the least of which are worn-out potato digger links that some people use to anchor flowers at grave sites. You see, 40- and 50-mph winds

are not uncommon here and the flowers need to be secured. Unfortunately, the links are not deck-friendly. Neither are the headstones, which over time can wear down the deck sides. Welding an additional wear strip around the deck provides added protection.”

While the sexton is mowing between stones and dodging old digger links, seven-year cemetery veteran Estrella is mowing the open areas. Since the entire cemetery is irrigated, the grass often outpaces the mowing schedule. When that happens, she starts mowing in the center of a wide area and discharges the grass outward. This technique leaves a windrow of grass that Isaacson collects with his GHS deck.

MEMORIAL DAY PUSH

To ensure the grounds are green for Memorial Day weekend, Isaacson dethatches the entire cemetery in March and turns on the water the first week in April. “After 60 days, the cemetery is looking very green,” he remarks. “Roughly 80 percent of cemetery visitors for the year come on Memorial Day, and that translates into somewhere between 4,000 and 6,000 visitors for the weekend.”

Subtract 16 years from his time with the cemetery and it’s apparent that Isaacson has had other life/work experiences. That’s an understatement. In fact, his cemetery employment is broken into two eight-year stints. In between, he was the Wendell city superintendent, member of the city council, and then mayor for four years.

Prior to his first eight years as cemetery sexton, Isaacson worked at a lumber saw mill and installed dairy equipment.



Headstones and worn-out digger links pose two challenges for man and machine.

“Together we mow a total of eight hours on Monday and Tuesday and again on Thursday and Friday. That’s 32 hours a week, every week, until the grass slows down.”

– Paul Isaacson

“The dairy business has done nothing but grow,” he explains. “Within seven miles of Wendell, there are 393,000 cows. Most of them, if not all, are on high-production farms.”

Likely Isaacson’s most interesting and demanding job, however, was working as a wilderness instructor. For two years he went on three-week expeditions (nine altogether) with troubled students. “We took them 100 miles into the desert and taught them how to live off the land, start a fire and stay warm, and find food,” says Isaacson. “To this day as I mow around the cemetery, I subconsciously identify weeds that can be used for food, tools or medicine.”

KEEPING BUSY

In addition to mowing lawns four days a week, this sexton has other chores to keep him busy. During the growing season, he turns irrigation valves on and off by hand that control 33 laterals. “Since we can operate only three lines at a time, watering is done around the clock,” he adds.

There’s also pruning and tidying up to do on Wednesday, the off-mowing day. The cemetery also prepares sites for burials, sets stones afterwards, and Isaacson is there to answer questions from visitors. His wife, Karen, who is the cemetery clerk, works out of a downtown office.

As a side note, Isaacson studied tool design engineering in college. As he says, often what one studies isn’t what he or she ends up doing. Not to say that the



Araceli Estrella tackles open areas with the Super B. Mowing from the inside out, she’s creating a windrow for Isaacson to collect with his Model MT with the GHS deck.

education hasn’t come in handy. Over the years, he’s completely remodeled the cemetery’s workshop, installed a chain hoist, and even come up with an interesting design for mulching blades. The cemetery’s 34-year-old John Deere 420 garden tractor, ’72 Dodge dump truck and 580L Case backhoe with 2,200 hours on it, have all benefitted from his mechanical expertise.

During the off season, when not upgrading the facility or maintaining equipment, Isaacson is updating cemetery records. Up until 25 years ago, the cemetery’s records were kept chronologically by the grave site purchaser. “It made it very difficult to locate sites where friends and relatives were buried,” Isaacson relates. “Part of my job has been

to upgrade the records and load them into a computer. Today I know just about where everyone is buried. That includes 400 veterans, among them four Civil War and two Spanish American War veterans.”

Considering all of his jobs over the years, Isaacson says he enjoys his current one the most. “I like being outside, breathing the fresh air, and seeing the wildlife here. The cemetery has 40 to 50 quails, plenty of rock chucks, and there’s even a horned owl to keep our vole population in check.”

Isaacson emphasizes that maintaining the cemetery is relatively easy compared to tromping three weeks through the wilderness. His Walker Mowers may have something to do with that. **WT**

So What's Your Brand?

How to create a powerful brand that actually helps your business perform better.

Do you have a brand? We're not simply talking about having a creative logo, a catchy tagline, or trucks and uniforms all the same color. No, we're talking about something that truly identifies your company, sets it apart from competition, and hopefully attracts smart, hard-working people to be part of your team.

According to Judy Guido, a longtime green industry consultant, every company has a brand, whether the owner actively promotes it or not. A brand, she emphasizes, is the sum of a company's parts. It's everything a company does. It's the promises a company makes to customers. It is customer expectations and how they're met. It's how the services are delivered.

An effective brand, Guido points out, creates both an emotional and economical reason for customers to buy your services and for employees to want to work for you. An effective brand can also enhance your relationship with important stakeholders such as insurance companies, bankers and equipment dealers.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Assume for a moment that you're looking for a new mower, be it a Walker Mower or some other manufacturer. You go to a dealer's website and find what you're looking for. Unfamiliar with the dealer, you take a little road trip, walk into the dealer's showroom, and low and behold, not only do you not see the machine you're looking for, but you don't see any merchandising that indicates the dealer even sells and services the brand. Chances are, you may just walk right back out the door.

The dealer created a false expectation and unintentionally misled a potential customer. Something similar can happen to your customers. Say you promote fast, reliable service, but then a would-be customer has to wait two days for an estimate or even a callback. You've already let the customer down and tarnished your brand. As Guido re-emphasizes, everything your company does reflects on your brand. How people answer the phone, crew appearance in the field, overall responsiveness

and quality of work are but a few key brand drivers.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

If you have a brand that doesn't seem to be resonating with potential customers, Guido suggests it may be because 1) it doesn't accurately depict the value of your brand, or 2) you've failed to create brand awareness among not only your potential customers, but your employees, as well.

"I ask my clients what Volvo's brand is. The answer, of course, is *safety*. What about Nike? The answer is *innovation*. Then I ask them to come up with one word for their brand. For many, this is a very difficult exercise, but forces owners to really think about their business and service offering and how best to describe it," says Guido.

Can you describe your brand in one word? Maybe it's expertise, perfection or responsiveness. How about two words, maybe something such as timely service, sustainable solutions or manicured look. Whatever it is, your brand needs to be grounded in reality and accurately reflect the type of service your company offers.

The first people to communicate your brand to are your employees. They need to understand your brand and how important they are in promoting and preserving it.

Timely service, for example, means more than showing up every week at the same time to mow. It also implies being responsive to calls and special requests. Sustainable solutions means more than helping your customers reduce their carbon footprint. It implies that your crews don't drive around in vehicles spewing dirty exhaust. Your Walker Mower is known for delivering a "manicured" look, but do your crew members look the part, as well?



While logos, taglines and color schemes won't describe your brand, they will work to help customers recognize your company. (Photo of Ray's Lawn Service in Moorhead, MN, a company that was featured in Walker Talk volume 46.)

BUILDING YOUR BRAND

Logos, taglines and color schemes won't describe your brand, but they will work to help customers recognize your company. So, too, will signage at projects, being visible around the community, and having an easily accessed and navigable website.

Most landscape contractors, like Tennessee-based Above All Lawncare (*Walker Talk* volume 43), rely heavily on word of mouth to build their brands. "Sometimes I think people complicate the branding process," says E.J. Cox, who owns the company with his brother, Blake. "Our brand can be described in two words: responsible and responsive. We do what we say we're going to do on a property by delivering quality work. And we're timely. Everyone who contacts us gets a response within 24 hours. It's very simple: People don't want to wait.

"Thanks to the internet, customers are smarter today and have easier access to contractors," Cox continues. "You can't afford to let more than a day pass before responding to an inquiry. You may not be able to come up with an estimate for two or three days, but you can certainly return their call."

Don't overlook the power of social media either, advises Guido. "Social media allow companies to build brands faster by allowing them to promote their brands virtually 24/7. Companies cannot only build their brands faster, but they can bury them quickly, as well, which is all the more reason to be consistent with who you are and what you do."

Is your brand working for you? "There are many ways to test a brand," adds Guido. "You get constant feedback in terms of overall good comments, even complaints, and special kudos for crews that do an excellent job. Do you have a good reputation? What is your level of awareness within your market and community? They are all indicators of how accurately your brand matches your company and its service offering, and how effectively you've been promoting it to your internal and external customers."

Does all of this discussion about

6 WAYS to measure your brand

So you have a new brand. Business consultant Judy Guido says one way to determine its efficacy is to give it the ACRILE test:

1. **Actionable.** Can you build a strategy around your brand?
2. **Credible.** Does it truly reflect your company?
3. **Relevant.** Can stakeholders relate to your brand?
4. **Impactful.** Does it deliver a call to action?
5. **Lasting.** Will it stand up to the test of time?
6. **Expandable.** Can it be easily incorporated into a logo and truck signage?


branding really make a difference? Do you really need a brand? Guido thinks so, noting that among the benefits is the fact that an effective brand creates differentiation, helps when recruiting employees, and is a more efficient way to grow your business than breaking into a new market or offering a new service. She notes that a brand also has economic value; it's

something to leverage if and when you plan to sell your company. **WT**

Judy Guido is founder of Guido & Associates, a green industry business management consulting company in California. She can be reached at 818-800-0135 or by emailing jmgguido@sbcglobal.net.

"Sometimes I think people complicate the branding process," says Above All Lawncare owner E.J. Cox. He is pictured here (seated) with brother Blake.





Turning a Passion into a **PROFITABLE BUSINESS**

The 4-A Landscape & Irrigation team (from left): Juan Arriaga, Johanna Groza, Andrew Groza, Grant Lannin, Pablo Jimenez, Armando Villanueva, Jace Johns, Jorge Pineda, Luke Middleton, Zel Rey, Eric Edmondson. Perry and Trevor Atkinson are on the Walker Mowers.

Oregon contractor trades teaching career for what he really loves to do.

Pickle ball? Ever heard of it? It's a variation of tennis played indoors. Perry Atkinson is an avid player. In fact, when not overseeing his \$1.6 million company, he likely can be found on court, honing his hand-eye coordination.

"I'm not ashamed to say I only work about 20 hours a week now," says the owner of 4-A Landscape & Irrigation in Bend, Oregon. "I've never been a workaholic."

One wouldn't know it, though, charting his career path. For several years, this

former fifth-grade teacher and principal worked evenings and weekends mowing lawns in Portland.

If teaching was his vocation, then mowing lawns with his son, Trevor, was his avocation. It was something they continued to do when Atkinson moved his family to the resort city of Bend in 2000. They didn't have the best tools for the job (i.e. an old Chevy Suburban and trailer that hauled a 21-inch Toro mower and a John Deere garden tractor), but they had a work ethic. The duo later added a "beat up" 32-inch mid-size

walk mower to their repertoire.

In 2002, father and son won their first commercial account. A year later, they linked up with a new builder in town thanks to an introduction from a student teacher.

"Bend was growing fast," says Atkinson. "The new builder was constructing HOAs and giving us more work. Frankly, we needed a better mower. I talked with a fireman friend who advised me to buy a Walker Mower. So I did. It was a 26-hp Model MT with a 42-inch GHS deck that cost around \$12,000.

“That first night, I couldn’t wait to finish teaching and try out my new mower,” Atkinson continues. “I mowed everything in sight and mentioned to my wife, Sabine, that evening how riding my Walker Mower wasn’t work at all. I was sold, to the extent that we now have five of them.”

Every year after that, until the recession, 4-A Landscape & Irrigation doubled its annual revenue, 80 percent of which came from maintenance and 20 percent from landscape renovation and installation. In 2005, Atkinson’s last year of teaching, he retained a salesperson to help grow his commercial business. He also purchased a second Walker Mower.

“I was teaching part-time then, but still putting in 80 hours a week between teaching and running our company,” Atkinson recalls. “I enjoyed teaching, but had always wanted to be in business—and landscaping was a passion of mine. So I quit, knowing that I could come back to teaching someday if need be.” Two years later, the recession hit.

THE 20/95 RULE

Bend’s recession lasted five years. Although 4-A’s landscape construction work dried up, the owner didn’t lay off employees, thanks primarily to his mowing and maintenance accounts.

When the city came out of the recession, the building boom restarted and Atkinson decided to hitch his wagon to a different rising star: residential construction. “We started to do more work with builders, installing landscapes, and moved away from HOA maintenance work,” he explains. “The HOA market can be very challenging. Virtually 95 percent of so-called nuisance calls were coming from HOA customers who represented less than 20 percent of our business.”

Atkinson still held onto commercial maintenance accounts comprised of shopping centers and other retail outlets. However, what was 80/20 maintenance/construction prior to the recession trended in the opposite direction. Sabine, who

“I enjoyed teaching, but had always wanted to be in business—and landscaping was a passion of mine. So I quit, knowing that I could come back to teaching someday if need be.”

– Perry Atkinson

was office manager and handled the books, now did more design work. Trevor became a licensed irrigation installer, one of four in the company today.

24-HOUR GUARANTEE

This teacher-turned-businessman attributes his success to many things, including his Walker Mowers and dealer, Superior Tractor & Equipment in nearby Redmond. “I couldn’t believe how much money I was making with them,” says Atkinson, referring to his first two Walker Mowers. “Superior’s Tony Sarao

has played a key role, too. His dealership provides a timely service not unlike the level of service we offer our customers.

“Our company motto is ‘serving customers with integrity,’” Atkinson continues. “Doing so is our top and bottom line, and that’s why we guarantee to fix anything that wasn’t done right the first time within 24 hours. Since more than 90 percent of our work comes from referrals, customer satisfaction has to be a top priority—and it is.

“But companies and their reputation are only as good as their employees



Perry and Sabine moved their family to Bend in 2000.

who interact daily with customers,” Atkinson adds. “I can teach new employees the profession and to have an eye for how a landscape should look, but I can’t teach them integrity; that has to come naturally.”

For Atkinson, integrity implies being trustworthy and having a good work ethic. “I’ve been very fortunate to have a great workforce. We have 16 full-time employees. Many, like Johanna Groza who runs the maintenance division, and

her husband, Andrew, who heads up design, have been with us several years.”

“Perry (Atkinson) treats us well,” says Johanna, when asked about their long tenure with the company. “We love what we do and we work hard. Perry appreciates that and he reciprocates.”

“When you find good employees, you pay them well, invest in them through education and helping advance their careers, and understand that their families come first,” Atkinson adds. “You also have to empower them. My 20-hour work week is possible only because I have the right people in the right places who make good decisions.

“Does it bother them that I spend time away from work, you ask? Not at all. They’ve taken ownership in what they do and it shows in their work and customers’ comments.”

Atkinson also thinks it’s important to continually challenge employees and vary their responsibilities. In his company, for example, this cross training has meant that employees can be interchangeable and fill in when and where needed.

Not to say this works for every owner. Landscape contractors have different philosophical approaches to running a business, and they come in all different shapes and sizes, as does their definition of success. Some want to dominate their markets, while others are content to carve out a comfortable niche.

Others, like Perry Atkinson, work hard to one day be able to disengage a bit and enjoy a hobby or two. Today it’s playing pickle ball and tomorrow it may be doing something else. But no matter what it is, it will only be made possible for this Walker user by having the right tools and right attitude to turn a passion into a profitable business. **WT**



Johanna Groza heads up the company's maintenance division. She and her husband, Andrew, are longtime 4-A employees.



Conditional Maintenance

It is interesting to think of the different places you find the Walker Mower being used and the varied conditions they are operated in. With that thought in mind, it is important to be aware of how these different conditions will affect the maintenance procedures that your Walker will require. As an operator, you most likely will see changing conditions throughout the mowing season, and because of that, you may need to adjust your maintenance procedures accordingly; e.g., an item that needs to be cleaned on a daily interval in “normal” conditions may need to be cleaned every hour in adverse conditions.

For the sake of space we will look at three common conditions that might be considered typical: 1) dry, dirty or dusty conditions, 2) wet, lush conditions, 3) additional attention required with sandy soils. In addition to the environmental variables on mower maintenance, there are two styles of mowing that can increase the need for maintenance in adverse conditions; both mulching and scalping have a tendency to expose the mower to more dirt and debris. As a note here, your Walker Owner’s Manual will be an excellent resource for the maintenance required in different conditions. My purpose here is to highlight some of these.

DRY, DIRTY OR DUSTY

Dry, dirty or dusty conditions require greater attention to detail and more frequent inspection along with cleaning and lubrication. The engine cooling and air filtration system will be the main focus

in these conditions as dirt ingestion and overheating are the enemy of your engine. But don’t neglect other items either. The checklist below will be a good beginning point for this inspection.

- Engine blower screen
- Engine cooling fins
- Radiator if applicable
- Air filter restriction gauge
- Air cleaner system
- Turbine pre-cleaner
- Lubricate grease fittings and oil points
- GHS exhaust screen
- GHS blower

WET AND LUSH

The next common condition is the wet, lush grass typically associated with springtime. As the grass comes out of dormancy, the maintenance requirements will change to deal with new growth and springtime mowing conditions. There will be wet, sticky plant juices that come with new growth of all kinds. Grasses, dandelions, clover and other nuisance growth tend to clog up the mower deck, engine cooling system and the GHS components. There also may be leaves, aeration cores and tree cotton during this time of year. Again, a checklist will help to call out areas that require extra cleaning attention during this season of mowing.

- Engine blower screen
- Engine cooling fins
- Radiator if applicable
- Clean underside of the deck housing
- GHS exhaust screen
- GHS blower

SANDY SOIL

Lastly, in looking at sandy soils, this is a condition that is year-round and requires a consistent maintenance schedule to keep your Walker in good condition and performing at its best. Sandy soil conditions cause accelerated wear—so extra maintenance can be expected. Sand is very abrasive to any material when moving at high speeds throughout your Walker, especially the GHS system and cutting blades. Following are the items that need more frequent and special attention in these conditions.

- Blade condition (sharpen more often and replace more often)
- GHS Blower (performance is lost if there is more than a 1/4-inch gap between the blower blades and housing)
- Raise the cutting height if possible (to reduce sand ingestion)
- Engine cooling fins
- Radiator if applicable
- Drive pulley and drive belt wear

IN CONCLUSION

Here we have attempted to cover the items that require additional attention in certain conditions. Use these lists along with the maintenance procedures found in your Owner’s Manual. If you will tend to these conditional maintenance requirements along with your regular maintenance, you will find that the performance and life you experience from your Walker Mower will increase. **W.T.**

Dealers Like Walker

Outdoor power equipment (OPE) dealers graded their top manufacturers in a recent survey sponsored by *Green Industry Pros* magazine, the results of which were published in its November/December 2015 issue.

A total of 35 leading OPE manufacturers were included in the survey. Dealers were asked to rate their manufactures on a scale of 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (awesome) on a

variety of criterion such as “product quality”, “parts fulfillment”, “warranty policies”. Dealers gave Walker high marks in almost every area (greater than four in 8 of 16 categories). In the overall rating, Walker bested all other manufacturers with a rating of 4.33 (between satisfactory and awesome).

Since Walker Mowers are only sold by independent outdoor power equipment dealers, and Walker depends on

dealer services for customer satisfaction, Walker was very pleased to have the dealer’s affirming vote of confidence in the Walker distributor/dealer program. Walker Mowers worldwide sales and service are handled by 47 distributors and approximately 1,200 dealers.

The complete report of the survey can be found by searching “2015 Power Equipment Manufacturers Report Card” at greenindustrypros.com.



NEW CATALOGS AVAILABLE

Updated for the 2016 Walker product line, two newly designed catalogs are now available. The Product Line Catalog (P/N 5895-31) and the Add-Ons Catalog (P/N 6895-17) give a comprehensive look at all that is offered by Walker and presents the Walker “Out Front” Advantage.

WALKER WARE

WHAT'S NEW AT WALKER WARE

There are a number of new items available for Walker enthusiasts including jackets, sweatshirts, T-shirts and hats for adults and kids. Take a look at walkerware.com.



MS14 GAINING MARKET ACCEPTANCE

Two years after introducing the redesigned Model S14, the sales of this model have quickly grown to the point that it is the third most popular model at 11% of sales.

The perennially popular T25i and T23 occupy the first and second positions in number of sales, but now the S14 is a solid entry in the Walker product line.

Walker believes the market acceptance of the S14 confirms the great balance of price, performance and value offered by this model.



NEW DISTRIBUTORS ONBOARD

Walker Manufacturing welcomes two new European distributors to the marketing program. Horoscoop Kft., Vecses, Hungary, reactivates the Walker market in Hungary after the original distributor become inactive several years ago. Similarly, the Sidan SRL company in Brescia, Italy, will be reintroducing the Walker to the Italian market after several years of minimal progress by the previous distributor.

HIGHEST-HORSEPOWER WALKER INTRODUCED

The Walker Model H38i with the 38-hp big block Kohler EFI engine installed in the “H” chassis has been introduced. This unit has plenty of power to operate all of the biggest Walker decks and attachments including the new 64” rear-discharge deck (DR64) while offering good fuel economy from the Delphi fuel-injection system. The power, ground speed and fuel economy of this model are optimized for high-production mowing. Available for delivery Spring 2016.



NEW 42” MULCH DECK DESIGN (DM42-2)

A new version of the 42” mulch deck has been developed, patterned after the well-performing DM48 design. The design uses cutting blades with a serrated wing (gator blades) and a blade hub with recirculator blades along with a new housing. Field testing has shown that the new configuration is performing very nicely in a wide variety of grass conditions and grass types. The earlier versions of 42” mulching decks, DM42A and DM42B, continue to be available for operators who prefer these decks, but Walker anticipates phasing them out of production as the DM48 is time-tested and field-proven.



DECKS UPDATED WITH ADJUSTABLE FOOTREST

Large decks for the MH tractor have a new adjustable footrest. First introduced with the DR64R deck, the DS60 and DR52 will now utilize the same design. There are two individual footrests that are easily adjusted in six fore-and-aft positions to suit operator leg lengths. Also, the new footrests retract, and along with a new belt drive cover, allows the deck to tilt up without removing the cover. Deck tilt-up is made easier using stronger counterweight springs and new hook geometry on the deck carrier frame.



MOLDED RUBBER SIDE-DISCHARGE SHIELDS FOR 42/48” DECKS

Molded rubber side-discharge shields replace the metal shields on DS42 and DS48 decks, offering increased durability. Heavy metal framing attaches the rubber shield to the deck discharge opening. The new shield assembly will fit on earlier units.



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