

WALKER TALK

SEVEN IS THE NUMBER

**in West Liberty,
Ohio**

Fran Meister, owner of Fran's Mowing and Snow Removal, has been using Walker Mowers for more than 20 years. Currently, there are seven Walkers in this fleet.

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MY BOOK

It is June 2021, and I have in my hands my newly published book, *The Walker Way*. I have written the story of the beginnings of Walker Manufacturing, leaving the family farming operation in Kansas, and all of the journey that led to the Walker Mower business that we enjoy today. Across the years, people have asked about the company's history, and as I have told the story, there would be the occasional comment, "You ought to write a book." So finally, with some of my duties at the company being handed off to the next generation, I started writing the book a little over a year ago.

Since the story starts over 60 years ago, the telling of some of these events may be getting better with time, and some of the hard things we faced are not so heavy as they once were. I believe that telling of a journey, telling stories, and telling lessons learned is all wound up in the giving of ourselves to be a help to others on their journeys. As is often said, "You can't make this stuff up," and the best stories are the real stories that have been lived in their times and circumstances.

For people of faith, we believe that God created each of us with a plan in mind for our life—it is up to us to discover the plan and live our life to the fullest extent of God's plan. Of course, mistakes are made, and human frailty often is a part of the story, and that needs to be told, as well, so that lessons can be learned, and mistakes not repeated.

I like to write and tell stories, but writing a book and getting it in print has turned out to be much more than that. There is a whole team of people to whom I am indebted for their help and giftedness in making this book come to life. I want to give special recognition to my long-time friend and editor, Rod Dickens, who co-wrote the book with me and helped make the manuscript easy to read. Rod is a gifted writer, editor, and storyteller. We first met when Rod was the chief editor for several publications in the landscape maintenance and outdoor power equipment industries, and ultimately the publishing company he worked with became the publisher of *Walker Talk* magazine—Rod was the primary editor for all 56 previous issues of *Walker Talk*. I am very grateful for Rod's collaboration in producing this book.

Another motivation for writing down our journey is to help the company move into the future with family leadership. Future family leaders can be helped on their journey by building on the business foundation laid by their forebears and taking note of the earlier times and lessons learned. The times will be different for each generation, but time-tested principles will still guide and show the way—The Walker Way.

Bob Walker, Chairman



PS: The book may be ordered in paperback and hardback versions at walkerware.com. Also, paperback, e-book (Kindle), or audio-book are available from Amazon.



FAMILY COMES FIRST

When an unforeseeable health scare forced Valentin Silva to the sidelines, his sons took control of his landscaping business. Now they are taking it in an exciting new direction.

From left: putting family first are Val, Daniel, Valentin and Abel Silva of Silva's Landscaping Co. in Ivanhoe, California.

The Silva brothers were encouraged by their parents to pursue any career they wanted. It was a familiar promise their father, Valentin Silva, was granted by his parents many years earlier. Ultimately, each of the Silva men chose landscaping. However, their paths took some unique twists and turns.

Valentin was already displaying a unique entrepreneurial spirit at the age of six when he sold gum at outdoor markets in his native Mexico. After migrating to the United States (California) in the 1970s, Valentin found work in landscape construction. Later he bounced back and forth between agriculture and landscaping. Eventually he started his own lawn maintenance company in 1990.

Valentin's four sons—David, Val, Daniel, and Abel—all grew up working with their father. “When school was out, we knew we’d be out there working with our dad, no questions asked,” Val recalls. “That was okay, because we loved it.”

Nonetheless, the brothers ended up taking their parents’ career guidance to heart and decided to pursue other opportunities. David stuck with groundskeeping, but went to work in the public sector. Val had his sights set on civil engineering. Daniel was contemplating either nursing or



Silva's has been using Walker Mowers for 20 years. It's a tale of two seasons in Central California. In the spring, it's all about manicuring lush, green Bermuda grass or St. Augustine. In the fall, it's time to overseed with perennial ryegrass that is kept much shorter for a few months.

"We knew that if we pulled together as a family, we could make it work."

Val Silva
Silva's Landscaping Co.

agriculture chemistry. Abel had a passion for technology and computer science.

Even while pursuing new careers, the Silva siblings continued to help their father as much as they could. Then, in 2010, everything changed. They would have to help a whole lot more.

TEST OF A LIFETIME FORCES NEXT GENERATION'S HAND

Valentin came down with a bad case of diverticulitis, which was followed by numerous complications. All told, he spent roughly seven months in the hospital.

When Valentin first became ill, his sons helped service accounts, so customers didn't cancel. But as time wore on, the three youngest brothers, Val, Daniel, and Abel, had a decision to make. "We all decided to stop what we were doing in pursuing our own careers and focus on the company," Val says. "We knew that if we pulled together as a

family, we could make it work."

The Silva brothers spent the next several months doing two things: maintaining landscapes and praying. They must have done a pretty good job. Clients stuck with them, their dad made a miraculous recovery and was eventually released from the hospital.

There was one hurdle to clear yet: the hospital bill.

"I will never forget the day that bill came in the mail," Val says with a shake of the head. "I won't even say how much it was. Let's just say that my brothers and I looked at each other and laughed. Fortunately, we knew someone in social services at the hospital who worked hard to make sure we applied for every type of assistance possible. By the grace of God, that entire bill was taken care of."

Nowadays, Valentin is doing well and still works in the business with his three youngest boys, Val, Daniel, and Abel, who have taken ownership of the company. David is

head groundskeeper at a prison, but he still works part-time in the family business as needed. Based in Ivanhoe, California, Silva's Landscaping Co. serves clients throughout the Central Valley.

IN SEARCH OF JOB SECURITY

In the year prior to Valentin becoming hospitalized, the housing bubble had burst. That meant the foundation of the company, residential customers, had become unstable. The decision to begin going after commercial accounts was an easy one.

Roughly 80% of the company's business now comes from commercial accounts like HOAs and multi-family complexes. "We still spend one day a week servicing residential customers," Val points out. "We've kept a handful of our best customers who are all concentrated in the same area. Then we refer new inquiries to other contractors we've developed relationships with. It's always hard



Valentin Silva typically starts a day by trimming some shrubs before hopping on a Walker Mower to cut grass and clean up the property.

to say 'no' to a new customer, but sometimes you have to in order to maintain the right work-life balance."

Balance is important to the Silvas. "We want to make sure we have time to spend with our families," Val says. "Work is not going to dictate to us or define us."

Although Val, Daniel and Abel are now the owners of the business, they are also operators. Each is out in the field every day running equipment. Each brother also has his own area of focus. Val oversees landscaping and irrigation. Daniel oversees the turf management program. Abel maintains his chemical applicator's license and handles all the spraying.

One task each of the siblings shares in is keeping an eye on Dad. Valentin has been a workhorse his entire life and can sometimes forget that he must pace himself now. He'll often start his day trimming a few shrubs before hopping on a Walker Mower for most of his shift. Rest assured, his boys make sure he doesn't overdo it.

YOUR BIGGEST COMPETITION IS YOURSELF

Since shifting toward commercial work, Silva's Landscaping has found the job security it was hoping for. That said, job security isn't automatic. The jobsites are more challenging, and standards are higher. There are a few ways Silva's Landscaping strives to stand out and retain clients.

"It's helpful when the face of the company, in this case me and my brothers, is on

the property every week doing the work," Val says. "This helps us improve communication with clients, react quickly to their needs, build better relationships and maintain a high standard."

Silva's Landscaping has begun using plant growth regulators to help slow down shrub growth without impacting its health or appearance. "We'll trim a hedge and shape it, and then Abel will come through later and spray it," Val explains. "This approach has helped reduce our trimming time by almost 40%."

Silva's Landscaping also uses unique custom-blended fertilizers and weed control products. Daniel, who is armed with four horticulture-related degrees, has become quite the chemistry whiz when it comes to turfgrass. He develops custom blends based on time of year, weather conditions and soil conditions. Daniel's turf management program has worked so well that a large property management company has begun leveraging it across all its properties in the region.

Finally, Silva's Landscaping has been using Walker Mowers for 20 years. As the company has shifted into commercial work, the Walker has provided an even more meaningful advantage.

"I give a lot of credit to our Walker Mower dealer, Jensen & Pilegard in Visalia, for the success we've had," Val says. It was the dealer who steered Val toward the Walker Mower when he expressed a need for something that could cut well and bag, but still handle bigger commercial properties in less

Watch this video on how the Silva family came together for the business.



SCAN ME

time than a walk-behind mower.

"Our dealer let us demo a Walker for a while," Val continues. "We noticed a difference right away with how efficient it was and how clean it left everything. Some of our clients asked us what we were doing differently because their lawns were looking a little different. Once we heard that feedback, we were sold."

To date, the Silva's have purchased five Walker Mowers. Val says they will surely buy more as needed, especially if the company continues to grow and add crews. That will happen naturally, though.

"One of the big things for our company is managing growth at our pace," Val says. "The other thing we always think about is the quality of our work. We don't want to get into any contract if we aren't certain we can manage it and give it our all. We've been in business for 30 years now. At the end of the day, our reputation is our most valuable asset. The moment we start pursuing that dollar sign and the quality of our work suffers, we know we'll end up putting a big stain on our reputation. That is not an option for us."

The other thing that isn't an option for the Silva family is the failure to put family first. ☺



SEVEN IS THE NUMBER

in West Liberty, Ohio



Fran Meister, owner of Fran's Mowing & Snow Removal in West Liberty, Ohio

Fran Meister and his wife, Bretnie, came up with a clever idea for a Christmas card this past December. Fran's Mowing & Snow Removal in West Liberty, Ohio, had just grown its Walker Mower fleet to seven units. Fran and Bretnie have five children. In other words, there was a Walker for each Meister to sit on. The concept was born, a photo was taken, and the card went out to all their customers.

Fran has been operating Walker Mowers for over 20 years. While he currently owns seven, he has lost track of how many he has bought and traded over the years. Fran operates other brands of mowers, too, carefully matching the right style and size to the application at hand. These days, however, a Walker

model is proving to be the right choice on more than one occasion.

"We do a lot of work for schools," Fran says. "When we're mowing big, open sports fields, we typically want a larger machine that discharges. But there are certain times of year, such as graduation season in May, where it is also nice to be able to bag."

Fran's Mowing doesn't serve any residential clients anymore. Rather, the company focuses on larger clients like schools and homeowner associations where more labor hours can be billed to a single property. As Fran points out, lawn maintenance contractors make their money providing lawn maintenance services, not driving all over the place from property to property. Providing lawn services is also where the enjoyment

is for a contractor, at least a contractor like Fran Meister.

A TROPHY TICKLES THE ENTREPRENEURIAL BONE

Fran first started mowing for money in the mid-1990s while still in high school. He hustled from one residential lawn to the next with his Steiner tractor, a nifty little all-seasons machine built roughly 150 miles away in Dalton, Ohio. Even at this young age, loyalty to the locals meant a lot to Fran.

"I was in the FFA (Future Farmers of America) back in high school, and actually used my mowing business for one of my FFA projects," Fran recalls. "I ended up winning a couple of awards. This encouraged me to pursue a career in groundskeeping."



Fran Meister's 11-year-old son, Ivan, has already become quite the mower operator.

The Meister family (from left): Izabella, Iris, Ivan, Fran, Bretnie, Imajene and Ike.

After graduating high school, Fran went off to college to study turf management. He had his sights on a career as a golf course superintendent. But when completing an internship at a local golf course, his eyes were opened to what he really wanted to do.

"I wanted to go back to having my own business," Fran says. "When working at a golf course, your budget is given to you. You're at the same place day after day. I really liked the thought of working on different properties and for different customers. I also liked the idea of being more in control of what I was doing."

After making a commitment to restart his mowing business, Fran made the short journey south to Louisville, Kentucky, to attend the landscaping industry's largest tradeshow.

"I can't remember if it was 1997 or 1998, but what I do remember is that this is where I first saw the Walker Mower," Fran relates. "I was fascinated, and ended up buying one about a year later."

Even though 22 years have elapsed, Fran remembers the feeling he got when he first started mowing with his new Walker. "I actually got a little mad at it," he says with a chuckle. "It was so comfortable and did such a good job, but I was a dedicated Steiner guy. There was no getting around the fact that it really outdid my Steiner, though. Since that time, we've always had a Walker around."

CASTING A TIGHTER NET

Fran's Mowing & Snow Removal has grown and changed a lot over the 22 years it

has been in business. At the same time, a few things have remained constant — especially Fran's desire to provide year-round grounds management.

"For anyone starting out in the lawn care business, you get what you can get because you have to make some money," Fran says. "When I think back 10 or 12 years ago, we were servicing around 80 properties. Now we service around 40. They are larger properties, though, and we provide more services."

On the day *Walker Talk* visited, all seven Walker Mowers were buzzing around a vast commercial property that includes a mix of condos and an assisted living facility. All five employees and Fran and Ivan were spending the entire day there. It's the kind of account Fran dreams of these days.



Through at least the end of May, the mowers bag the heavy top growth brought about by a late-winter fertilizer application.

“We looked at our customer base and asked ourselves, who will hire us all year round?” Fran says. “We’ve had to plow snow on a lot of Christmases over the years, but that’s just how it goes.”

Snow removal has become an increasingly significant part of Fran’s business. He leases two skid-steer loaders that remain parked at two huge parking lots his company has been hired to plow. When it snows, an employee drives directly to a lot to hop in a loader and start plowing. Another employee comes by later with a salting truck. Several other snow removal accounts are managed with the typical truck-plow-spreader setup.

“I actually have more people working for me during the winter because a lot of farmers and asphalt contractors are looking for

while. I don’t know why, but it seems like the magic age is 30-plus. That said, I’ve also had luck with college students working seasonally. By the time college lets out in late May, we typically have seven employees working full-time.”

One other “student” who has become a reliable employee is Fran’s oldest son, Ivan. Fran and Bretnie started home-schooling Ivan when COVID hit last year. Bretnie says it has been a blessing to see how much Ivan has blossomed over the past year. Part of that development can be attributed to the experience of working with his father.

“Ivan has gotten really good at running a Walker,” Fran says with an ear-to-ear smile. “I pay him, of course, but I sock that money away or he’d spend it all on eBay.”

Fran has also invested in a couple of 64-inch rear-discharge decks. “These are really great in the open areas we mow, as well as back yards,” Fran relates. “This way our employees don’t have to worry about blowing grass onto flower beds, houses or windows. A rear-discharge deck takes that potential problem and puts it away.”

Fran Meister likes to put problems away. Sometimes a better piece of equipment is the answer, and sometimes a better work process is what’s needed. In any event, Fran’s 22-year career has been all about learning from experience.

One “problem” Fran can’t seem to get around is the fact that his Walker dealer is more than two hours away. That’s why he is on a strict three-year trade-in cycle.

“We like to upgrade two mowers a year,” Fran says. “We’re typically putting around 1,000 hours on before we replace. Our dealer, Emmett Equipment, is great. They walk us through things over the phone and ship us parts. But we’ve had to learn how to work on our mowers because we don’t have that kind of time to spare during the growing season.”

Just another problem Fran Meister and his outstanding team have learned to put away over the years. ☺



Turf care and lawn mowing work harmoniously for Fran Meister. In fact, his Walker Mower even gets in on a little lawn care action by powering a time-saving overseeder.

work,” Meister says. “So that works out great. Landscaping season is different. It is becoming difficult to find people. Thankfully, I have some really good ones who’ve been with me a

TAKING CARE OF TURF

Providing mowing and snow plowing services helps Fran’s Mowing appeal to larger customers like HOAs, schools and businesses. What really sets the company apart is Fran’s background in turf management. His turf care regimen works harmoniously with his lawn mowing regimen.

“We always apply a late-winter fertilizer treatment,” Fran explains. “That way we get a lot of nice top growth in early spring, which is why we have to bag our grass at least through May, especially on front lawns and sports fields. Once we get into June, we start to monitor things. If the growth slows down enough, we’ll start switching over to mulching decks to start recycling the grass back into the lawn. Whatever we’re doing, we use 48-inch decks.”

Watch Fran Meister share his story of seven Walker Mowers working in harmony in this video.



SCAN ME

'THE WALKER MOWER SAVED ME'

Jacob Wolfe (left) has been working with Luke Kroeger for the past couple of years. "I've never seen anybody pick up driving a Walker as fast as Jacob did," Luke says.



At just 19 years of age, Luke Kroeger talks like someone who has been in the lawn maintenance business his entire life. It's likely because he pretty much has been—at least for half of it.

"I pushed my lawnmower all over the neighborhood when I was 10," Luke recalls. "I mowed for anyone and everyone who was willing to hire me. There were some days when I pushed my mower as far as a mile away from our house."

Make no mistake, Luke Kroeger put some serious mileage on those little 10-year-old legs. They got stronger and stronger, though. Perhaps that's one reason why he turned into such a standout soccer player in high school. But then, after undergoing a routine sports physical his junior year, the

energetic and physically fit Kroeger got the shock of a lifetime.

"The doctors told me they didn't think

The same day Luke was first diagnosed with heart failure was the day he purchased his first Walker Mower. The timing almost gives you goosebumps.

something was quite right with my heart," Luke tells. To be specific, his EF (ejection fracture rate) was around 13%. Normal is 60%. The cutoff for life support is 15%. "I was right on the edge of being too far gone," Luke says.

At the age of 16, Luke Kroeger was in heart failure. The doctors initially thought he would need to undergo a heart transplant. First things first, Luke was put on a salt-free diet and regimen of medication. Slowly his condition started to improve. Today, three years later, he is doing extremely well and could soon be taken off his medication.

Along with a happy ending, this story also has a heaping helping of irony.

The same day Luke was first diagnosed with heart failure was the day he purchased his first Walker Mower. The timing almost gives you goosebumps.

"I was still push mowing all of my yards up until that point," Luke says. "Obviously, with a heart condition like I'd found out I had, push mowing 20 yards a week was not going

to happen anymore. So, I ended up working out a deal with my doctor. I told him that my mowing business was something I could look forward to and was a great reliever of stress during these hard times. I told him I now had a riding mower and wouldn't have to walk much at all. My doctor agreed to let me mow from 8 to 10 a.m., and then 5 p.m. until sunset. That was because the heart medication I was on made me hypersensitive to sunlight."

Luke was able to make his disjointed schedule work, giving a lot of the credit to his family, friends, and new Walker Mower. "I was able to keep up with the work and keep all of my customers happy," Luke says. "From there my company, LR Scapes in Wichita, Kansas, slowly began growing into what I have today."

FOCUS ON WHERE YOU CAN BE AT YOUR BEST

What Luke Kroeger has today is a client base of 55 to 60 customers. He focuses on the residential market because that is where quality matters most. Beautifully landscaped front yards and spacious back yards are well-fertilized and irrigated. All those lush fescue lawns require the right mowing contractor with the right mowing equipment to leave them looking clean and elegant.

"We like to change up the ways we mow," Luke explains. "A lot of big landscape companies tend to mow the same direction every



Luke Kroeger says it has helped to focus on residential yards where a beautiful cut and attention to detail are what the customer is willing to pay for.



Luke says the only thing he'd ever change on his Walker Mower is the wheel color. "I just think black looks really awesome, so I painted mine," Luke says.



Luke says string trimming is the least enjoyable part of the job. A front-mount mower helps cut back on a lot of it, but there is just no getting around string trimming completely.

See Luke Kroeger share his story of survival in this video.



SCAN ME

When it's really wet out, Luke and Jacob still have to catch clippings. But the mulching decks are so effective now that it is hard to tell the difference. In fact, as shown here, the bagging system was deactivated on this mower—yet this spacious back yard was left with striking striping and a clean, finished appearance.



week. That ends up causing wear in the yard. We take pride in trying to make the designs cool with cross-lapping or other patterns.”

Luke first developed a fascination with “mowing stripes” as a young boy mowing his grandparents’ farm. That’s also where he developed a preference for recycling clippings back into the lawn.

“Bagging grass can be backbreaking work,” Luke says, referencing the need to physically move it from trailer to compost pile at the end of each day. “Bagging can also be a logistical nightmare if you don’t have a convenient way to get rid of the grass.

“Customers often ask if we’re going to bag the clippings,” Luke continues. “Nowadays, I tell them we should look at some other options, too. More and more, we’re trying to bag less and less. We can only get away with it because of my new Walker with the new mulching deck. There are times when we have no choice but to bag, like when we get nine inches of rain in a week. But most of

the time, we just mulch now. When I ask my customers for feedback, most can’t even tell the difference.”

Luke says there have been a few other secrets to his success. One is having the discipline to mow slow and steady, which is especially critical when mulching thick fescue grass. Secondly, Luke does not leave the garage in the morning without razor-sharp blades. Finally, he always uses organic-based cooking oil.

Huh?

“I’ve started spraying the underside of our mower decks with an organic cooking oil I found,” Luke says. “It does an amazing job of keeping grass from building up on the deck. Since it’s organic, it is perfectly safe for the grass.”

On the day *Walker Talk* visited, Luke Kroeger and his lone employee, Jacob Wolfe, were donning brand new T-shirts provided by their dealer, Andover Lawn Equipment in Andover, Kansas. Luke says his dealer has

been another secret to his success.

“I bought Stihl handheld equipment from Andover Lawn Equipment long before I purchased my first Walker,” Luke recalls. “TJ at Andover Lawn kept telling me, ‘Luke, you have to get a Walker ... it will help elevate your business to the next level.’ It definitely did that. But I never thought you could actually say that it helped save my life.”

He’s only 19, but Luke Kroeger has a long track record of success in lawn maintenance. He has also been through a lot.

“It has all helped make me into the person I am today,” Luke says. That person is now a chemical engineering student at the University of Kansas who still finds time to own and operate a successful lawn maintenance business. It’s remarkable, really, since the mowing season lasts from early March through well into November. Mowing has always been an important part of Luke’s life — and always will be. Luke states it very simply: “The Walker mower saved me.” ☺

GROWTH 'THROUGH THE ROOF'

IN FLORIDA RETIREMENT VILLAGE



Oxford Lawn Services' niche is mowing, trimming and edging. Thanks to great employees and equipment, Tom O'Brien says they do it better than anyone else.

Tom O'Brien ditched his life as a New Jersey auto repair shop owner in 2008. He wanted a fresh start, a new career in a new place to call home. After doing some research, he and his wife, Tracie, settled on an area roughly 50 miles northwest of Orlando, Florida.

"We learned about this retirement community called The Villages," Tom says. "From what I'd heard, it was one of the largest retirement communities in the country. Growth was absolutely through the roof back then and still is today. We also learned that the per capita income is quite high. It's the perfect place to start some kind of service business."

Tracie was an experienced hairdresser, so finding a good-paying job in a salon would be easy. For Tom, on the other hand, it would be a different story.

"I learned that auto repair rates in this part of Florida were not very good," Tom says. "I knew I wasn't going to try and start that kind of business again. My parents were already down here. One day I saw the guy who mows their property. I asked him what the lawn maintenance business was like and if I could ride around with him once in a while to learn about it. He told me there was no shortage of work. There was also good money to be made if you knew how to run a service business."

Tom's landscaping "mentor" had planned on retiring soon and passing the business on to his son. But the son had lost interest. After some negotiation, Tom bought the business. At that time, there were 30 accounts on the books. Today there are roughly 350.

Oxford Lawn Services in Wildwood, Florida, has become a leading provider of residential mowing services in The Villages. "Our niche is mowing," Tom points out. "We do some sprinkler service for our existing customers, but not a lot. We don't do any fertilizing or landscape installations. We are even getting out of the shrub trimming business. In a market like this, you have to focus on your niche and do it better than anyone else—and then do a lot of it."

THRIVING IN A VOLUME MARKET

Tom refers to The Villages as a "volume



Oxford Lawn Services runs two 2-man crews. From left: Diamond Albertie, Sean Drew, Tom O'Brien (owner) and Matthew Wright.

market.” There is a lot of work available, but also a lot of contractors competing for it. Pricing pressure is heavy. Fortunately for Tom, he had a lot of experience working in cutthroat markets. Now as a lawn maintenance contractor, he knew what he needed to do to succeed. “I had to deliver mowing services better, provide better customer service, keep routes tight and pack them full,” Tom says.

Oxford Lawn Services runs two 2-man crews. A longtime crew leader actually left the company earlier this year after deciding to move closer to family. To start the season, Tom is back in a truck. Thankfully, Tracie is helping manage the back end of the business while Tom helps service properties. That is no small feat given Tracie’s rapidly expanding flower farming business.

Thanks to the tight routing, each crew can service around 35 properties per day.

As a result, Tom is in the enviable position of being able to turn work away if it isn’t a good fit.

“The Villages continues to grow like crazy,” Tom points out. “The developer is selling 300 or 400 new homes a month. As The Villages has expanded south, we’ve begun shifting our service area with that growth. It can be difficult to tell longtime customers that we aren’t going to be able to mow their property anymore. But they understand, and we always provide them with good referrals.”

When *Walker Talk* visited Oxford Lawn Services on April 1, Tom’s phone was buzzing all day long with people calling for estimates. He says it is the result of old-fashioned word of mouth. As burgeoning as The Villages is, the retirees who live there remain pretty close-knit. Many have been talking about the higher level of professionalism

Oxford Lawn Services provides.

“Having operated a service business in the Northeast for so long, I think we have an advantage,” Tom says. “The majority of the retirees buying homes on the southern end of The Villages are from the Northeast. They have a higher expectation of their service contractors. We understand how to provide that.”

First of all, all employees are uniformed. Trucks are clean with attractive decals. But the real secret? “I answer my phone,” Tom says. It might sound basic, but that is the top complaint Tom hears from new customers when asking why they are looking for a different lawn maintenance provider.

STRIPES OR NO STRIPES, IT’S STILL ABOUT THE CUT

One other thing Tom often hears from new customers relates to cut quality. His



Both Tom and Tracie O'Brien traded in their lifelong careers for one more connected to nature when they decided to move to Florida.



Tom O'Brien was back in the field earlier this year after a valuable employee moved away to be closer to family.

Walker Mowers with 42- and 48-inch mulching decks provide him with another advantage.

"When a potential new client tells me they are unhappy with the ruts and divots their previous contractor was leaving, I ask them to come outside so I can show them the

"We don't do much bagging. Here in Florida, it's all about that perfectly flat, carpet-like appearance. We mulch our lawns to 3 inches for zoysia grass and 3.5 inches for St. Augustine."

Tom O'Brien, Oxford Lawn Services

kind of mower we use," Tom says. "We don't do much bagging. Here in Florida, it's all about that perfectly flat, carpet-like appearance. We mulch our lawns to 3 inches for zoysia grass and 3.5 inches for St. Augustine. We have still found that the Walker is the best mower when mulching. I show the client how the deck is out front and articulates with

the terrain. I point out the wide footprint of the tires and explain how ground pressure works. I point out the tire in the back of the mower and how the drive tires are in the center. All of this engineering keeps our mowers from damaging the lawn. They're sold."

In addition to the two mulching mowers, Oxford Lawn Services does have a GHS machine. It is used to mow overgrown properties, such as when a snowbird finds out that their previous mowing contractor hadn't been doing much mowing at all. "We also use the GHS mower in the fall when dethatching lawns, as well as in the spring when picking up leaves," Tom says. "I also bought a 56-inch side-discharge deck this year for a select few properties. This setup is replacing the mid-mount zero-turn we had been using."

Tom regularly talks about his equipment choices and other topics on social media, mainly Instagram (@oxford_lawn) and TikTok (@oxfordlawn). He is especially skilled at creating videos, many of which have thousands of likes and shares. Tom honed his video-producing skills prior to owning his lawn maintenance business. He once had

popular YouTube channels for both camping and fishing.

Now Tom is making an online impact as a lawn maintenance influencer. In fact, he is part of a group called LawnFluencer—a collection of 20 or 30 landscaping professionals that each create their own social media content and promote various products.

"It is a lot of fun," Tom relates. "This is also turning into a side income stream through some of the product promotion we end up doing. There is just so much money to be made on the internet these days. Why not try to get in on it?"

There is also good money to be made as a lawn maintenance contractor in The Villages. Yes, it's a volume market and you can only charge so much. But with the right customers in the right locations, and the right employees operating the right equipment, the opportunity is through the roof. ☺

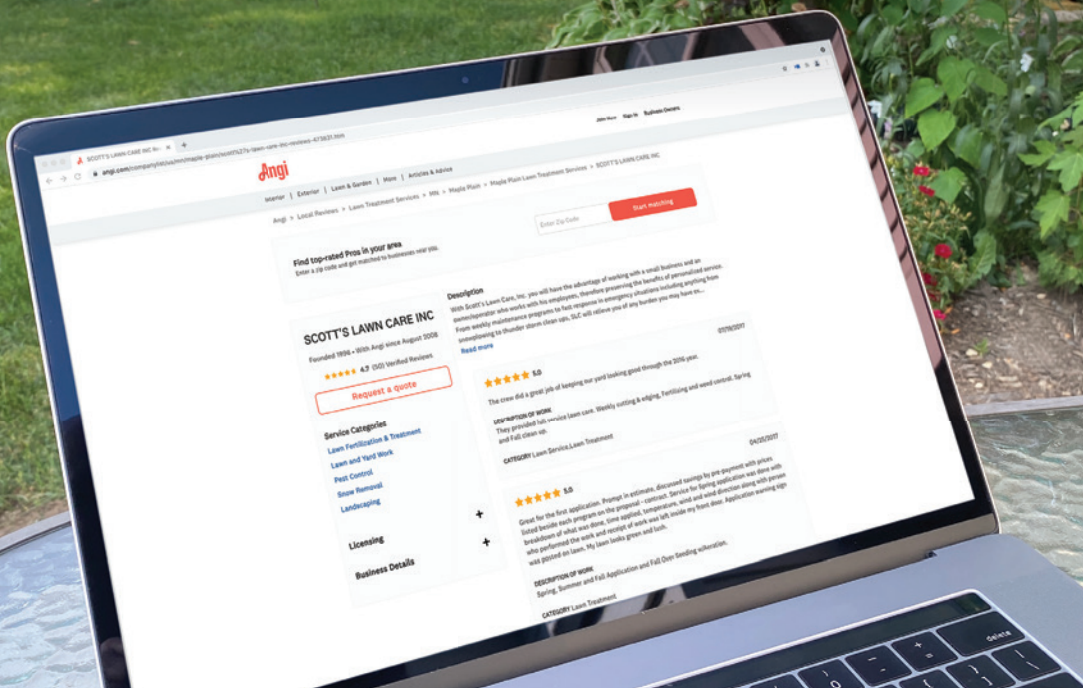
Watch the video to see more of Tom and Tracie O'Brien talk about their exciting life changes in Florida.



SCAN ME

HOW TO MANAGE ONLINE REVIEWS

A landscaping company can take advantage of virtually every customer touch point to politely ask for an online review. In the end, it comes down to quality and professionalism.



Tips to help pump up the positive while neutralizing the negative

It is becoming increasingly important for local service companies to have a proactive strategy for managing online reviews. Plenty of positive reviews can help get the phone to ring. Too many negative ones can scare off potential new customers.

Keep in mind that even the greatest of landscaping companies might get a bad review from time to time. The key is making sure the good ones overshadow it. Don't assume, however, that your happy clients will

rush out and post reviews about you. Your customers likely need some gentle reminding.

A landscaping company can take advantage of virtually every customer touch point to politely ask for a review. For example:

- Email and text marketing
- Invoices
- Email signatures
- Social media posts
- Reviews page on the company website
- Customer surveys

You can also ask for reviews when speak-

ing with customers over the phone or in person, especially when a customer just complimented you. But again, be humble and polite.

First off, reiterate how privileged you are to service the customer's property. Then you can casually ask if they'd mind hopping online to offer a review sometime. Some contractors even go an extra step by texting or emailing a link to their online business listing. This spares the customer the extra work of searching for your company online.

A successful Walker Mowers dealership has found that tying reviews into a promotion can help drive participation. The good news is that once you get the ball rolling, it can gain momentum quickly.

"We started to see the importance of having positive online reviews a few years ago," says Kait Joyce, treasurer of Stewart's Power Equipment in Holbrook, Massachusetts.

"We had a piece of handheld equipment, I think a chainsaw, that was aging in inventory. We decided to give it away in a drawing. We had signs at our counter telling our customers that if they posted a review of us, they'd be entered into the drawing. We told them that it didn't have to be a glowing review, either. We just wanted them to go online and share their experience of doing business with us."

Joyce was confident that the reviews would be good ones, though, because she was confident in the dealership staff. She was right. In just a few months, Stewart's Power Equipment had a pile of positive reviews, and now they continue to trickle in with no promotion at all.

FOCUS ON THE RIGHT PLACES

There are so many online review platforms these days. Websites like Angie's List,

Home Advisor, Houzz, and Thumbtack are geared specifically toward home service providers. But if you're looking to make the biggest impact for your effort, it's a good idea to focus on Google My Business, Facebook, and Yelp, in that order. Yes, Yelp is in the mix. It's a misconception that Yelp is only important for restaurants. Home services account for a significant percentage of Yelp's revenues. Thus, Yelp should not be arbitrarily dismissed.

That said, Google My Business is where you should get started. Why? Your Google business listing comes up first when people search for your company online. Joyce has her Google account set up so she receives an email as soon as someone posts a review on Stewart's Power Equipment.

Tom O'Brien, owner of Oxford Lawn Services in Wildwood, Florida, also places his focus on Google My Business. He, too, gets a notification sent to his phone when a new review is posted. "I've found that it's very important to set it up so you receive notifications—and make sure you have your notifications turned on on your phone so you know when you receive one," O'Brien says.



Tom O'Brien of Oxford Lawn Services in Wildwood, Florida, sets up his Google My Business account to send notifications to his phone whenever a new review is posted.



Landscape companies should also recognize that some online review platforms are not what they used to be. Like anything in marketing, results should be measured to avoid wasting time and money on platforms that are not helping.

Scott's Lawn Care in Maple Plain, Minnesota, has around 50 positive reviews on Angie's List (now referred to as Angi). But most of them were written many years

ago. Furthermore, the pace of solid sales leads from Angie's List has slowed dramatically.

"Up until a couple of years ago, Angie's List drove a lot of business our way," says Scott Hartmann, owner of Scott's Lawn Care. "We track all of our sales leads. In terms of closing ratio, Angie's List was always a close second to word of mouth. But the volume of leads has really dwindled. So, we're not putting much time into Angie's List anymore."

Nowadays, Hartmann is keeping an eye on some of these emerging neighborhood chat-type forums like Porch and Nextdoor. Social media is also playing a bigger role in lead generation. It's all about emphasizing the areas that are most effective. When it comes to reviews and landscaping companies, Google My Business, Facebook, and Yelp are solid bets.

RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Regardless of which review platforms you focus on, a negative review or two is likely to slip into the mix from time to time. While some might cast wild generalities over non-specific situations, they are not to be dismissed.

"It's important to monitor and respond to online reviews—both good and bad—in order to connect with your customers and give context to their comments," says Matthew Olson, president of Signalfire, an award-winning creative marketing agency that caters to small and medium-sized businesses. "You will undoubtedly come across instances where reviewers launch a full-on assault on your business's integrity. The comments themselves are out of your control, but you can control your response."

Olson, who spoke about digital marketing at the virtual iLandscape Show in Chicago this past spring, says landscape contractors should avoid reacting defensively. Instead, apply the "customer is always right" mentality and offer an honest apology.

"Bad reviews often result from customers who simply want their opinions to be heard," Olson points out. "Show customers you care and present an option to mend fences."

Once you've spoken with a bad reviewer and smoothed things over, Olson says you



Stewart's Power Equipment in Holbrook, Massachusetts, had success when tying reviews into a separate promotion. That helped get the ball rolling quickly, and now reviews come in at a steady clip with no promotion at all.

should politely ask them to take their bad review down. "But do not ask until you know the reviewer is happy again," Olson says. "You have to earn that ask."

Scott's Lawn Care has been hit with a negative review or two, and sometimes it is not justified. Hartmann says you should keep an especially close eye on Facebook.

"We've had people give us horrible reviews, but they aren't even our customers," Hartmann relates. "Scott's Lawn Care is a

"Bad reviews often result from customers who simply want their opinions to be heard. Show customers you care and present an option to mend fences."

Matthew Olson, president of Signalfire

fairly common company name around the country. When that happens, we reach out and explain that they have the wrong Scott's Lawn Care. Most of the time they remove it right away and apologize. We use a marketing company to help us manage these types of things. When a new review or comment is posted about us, they notify us within an hour. Then our internal team can decide on how to go about responding."

Joyce says that negative reviews are pretty few and far between for Stewart's Power Equipment. When there is a negative one, she jumps right on it.

"I look up the customer's account to see what business we've done with them," Joyce relates. "I reiterate that in my response to show we are taking an active interest in their situation. Then I ask the customer what we can do to make things better. One of the few times this happened, we actually ended up turning a 1-star review into a 5-star."

"You have to respond to every negative review," O'Brien reiterates. "You also have to learn how to accept them. As hard as it can be sometimes, you should always apologize. Never bash the person. Just own whatever they said, assuring them that you will work harder next time to make things better. This will help soften the blow, so to speak."

O'Brien says he also takes the time to respond to positive reviews. It's as simple as just saying thank you. Make it personal, too, by mentioning the customer's name.

Online reviews are about allowing the customer to play a role in building your online reputation. There is nothing to fear, as long as you have a strategy for pumping up the positive while neutralizing the negative. At the end of the day, everything ties back to the quality of service you provide and the professionalism you display toward customers. ☺

KOHLER ENGINE USES EXTENDED LIFE OIL AND FILTER



Starting with S/N 21-168265, all Walker Mowers equipped with Kohler Engines are factory serviced with an extended-life PRO engine oil and PRO oil filter; the oil/oil filter change interval is increased to 300 hours. The new oil and oil filter are not required for future service but are recommended. Earlier tractors produced before this change can take advantage of the extended service interval by switching to Kohler PRO products at the next regular service. Order Kohler PRO Oil Change Kit, Kohler P/N 25 850 02-S. Note: If conventional oil and filters are used in the tractor, the oil must be changed after every 100 hours, and the filter must be changed after every 200 hours.

TRANSMISSION OIL PERFORMANCE SYSTEM (TOPS) ADDED

The new Transmission Oil Performance System (TOPS) has been added to all tractor models (MC, MT, MD) with Eaton Model 7 (M7) transmissions. TOPS consists of a reservoir, oil pump and oil filter which actively circulates and filters contaminants out of the transmission oil. With TOPS, tests have shown the oil is kept significantly cleaner which improves performance, reduces wear, and extends transmission life. Additionally, an oil change has been added to the maintenance schedule, and if the TOPS system is serviced per the recommended schedule by an authorized Walker dealer, Walker will extend the transmission warranty to 3 years, full replacement coverage, unlimited hours.



LARGER DECK AVAILABLE FOR MR21

The DS54-R deck provides a step-up size for the MR21, facilitating wide-area mowing for the acreage owner. A belt-driven, three-blade design gives short deck-coupling, precision-quality cut, and good trimming capability. The Accelerator grass catcher mounts on this deck as an option. A mulch kit will be developed at a later date.



48-INCH SIDE DISCHARGE DECK INTRODUCED (DS48-3)

A new 48-inch, side discharge deck with belt-driven blades has been developed, fitting on Models B, C, D, S, T (tractors with PTO driveshaft). The design is based on the Model R deck geometry and is reinforced for commercial use. This deck features quiet operation, high quality cutting, and an optional Accelerator side-mounted grass catcher. The same mulch kit as used on the Model R 48" deck also fits this deck.

MODEL B FITTED WITH IMPLEMENT HITCH AND SOFT CAB

The new style Model B (B23/B27i) now has an implement hitch (H21) and mount kit for the (A17) soft cab. Also, a 50-lb tail weight kit and optional add-on weight plates are used to counterweight when lifting the front mounted implements.



EATON HYDROSTATIC TRANSMISSION OIL CHANGED

For models MS (before S/N 128441), MC, MT, MD equipped with Eaton Model 7 (M7) transmissions, the transmissions are now factory filled with Mobil SHC 630 high temperature formulated/rated oil, offering extended service life and improved transmission performance. Also, a 75-hour break-in and 500-hour oil change have been added to the maintenance schedule when using this oil. It is recommended to change to the new oil on all earlier units at the next scheduled service. See your Walker dealer for this service as instructed in Service Bulletin #21274.

12% 18%

WALKER EXPERIENCING STRONG RETAIL SALES

In spite of turbulent times in the USA and around the world, Walker retail sales have increased at a surprising rate. Using retail financing deals and warranty registrations as the barometer, retail sales have increased +12% and +18% respectively in 2021. The Walker factory has ramped up production to meet the market demand, but has fallen short, so equipment inventories at dealers are lower than usual. Walker reports that production has been throttled by supply chain disruptions (as noted by many manufacturing companies in these times), and they will be working to increase the supply of Walker Mowers as soon as they are able.



200,000TH MOWER DECK PRODUCED

On June 1, 2021, the Walker factory celebrated production of the 200,000th mower deck. It is interesting to note that except for the first few years of production, some Walker Mower owners purchase extra mower decks. With 200,000 decks produced and a little over 170,000 tractors, the statistic is 17% more decks have been sold than tractors.

DISTRIBUTOR CHANGE IN UPPER MIDWEST ANNOUNCED

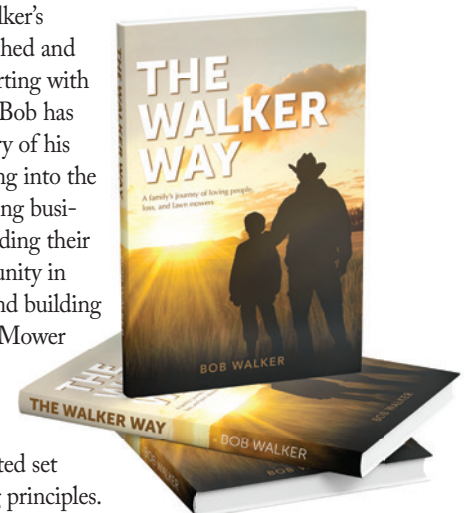
Walker Manufacturing announces that effective July 2021, the Walker Mower distributor for Ohio, Michigan and Eastern Indiana will change from Emmett Equipment Company (Richfield, Ohio) to Precision Work, Inc. (Port Washington, New York). Emmett has been the Walker Distributor for this area since 2002. "We have enjoyed working with the dedicated Emmett team, and we are thankful for all of the progress they have made," says Walker Chairman, Bob Walker. "Company founder Tom Emmett was a key part of the development of the Walker market in these states until his passing in 2016, but now they have decided to move away from the distribution business and concentrate on the retail sales and service part of their business." Emmett will continue to be a Walker dealer working under the Precision program.

As the longest-time, largest Walker distributor, covering the nine northeastern states from Maine to Pennsylvania, Precision will assume responsibility for this additional territory. Precision's president, Jeff Plotka, says his team is excited to welcome the new Midwestern dealers into the Precision Work family: "Our company has been built on strong relationships with dealers who we like to treat like family, and we look forward to bringing the same program, service and attention to detail to these new dealers."

'THE WALKER WAY' BOOK IN PRINT

Bob Walker's book is finished and printed. Starting with his parents, Bob has told the story of his family getting into the manufacturing business and finding their best opportunity in designing and building the Walker Mower along with the lessons learned and a collected set of operating principles.

The book may be ordered at walkerware.com in paperback or hardback or from Amazon in paperback, e-book, or audiobook. Also make sure and stop by thewalkerway.com to learn more about the book and sign the guest book.



WALKER WARE

Walkerware.com is the place for Walker enthusiasts to purchase Walker clothing and collectibles. This one-stop shop is also great for gifts for Walker fans of all ages.



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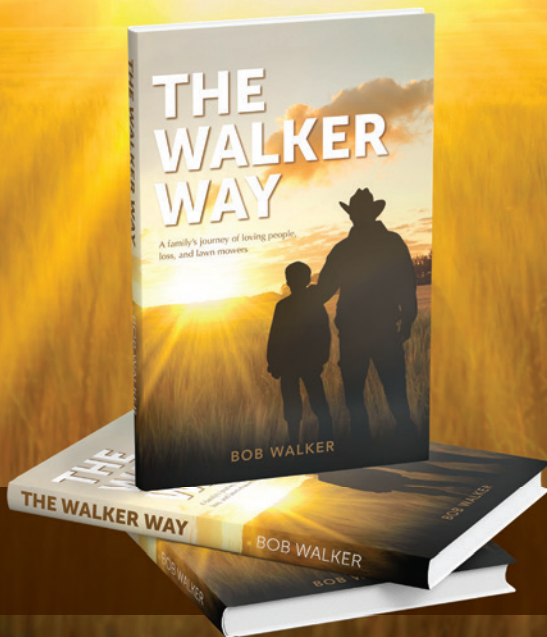
A family's journey of loving
people, loss, and lawn mowers

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