

# Landscape Trades

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# Success with SNOW is all in the details

Prioritize, plan and prepare for winter —  
contractors talk about getting things right when snow flies.

BY SUSAN HIRSHORN

**In 1993** the city of Syracuse, N.Y., had a record snowfall of 43 inches in 24 hours. "It took us three days to clear what we normally clear in seven hours," recalls Rick Kier, owner of Pro Scapes Inc., a grounds care firm that has been servicing commercial and residential customers throughout central New York for over two decades. When he billed his customers extra for this event, they tended to react in one of two ways, he says. "One reaction was: 'Gee, if I'd known it would cost extra

*I would have had my cousin come over with his backhoe and clear us out for free!' Then we had other people who said 'I'm really glad you got here. I don't mind paying extra. But if you could have been here a little sooner I would have liked it.'"*

#### SET PRIORITIES

The lesson that Kier learned back then led him to develop a severe storm strategy that has resulted in happier



Ensuring all equipment is regularly maintained and in good working order will keep the focus on fighting a winter storm during an event.



To avoid confusion and possibly unsafe situations, check with customers to identify where large quantities of snow should be piled before a big storm hits.

customers, fewer slip-and-fall claims and more profits. Essentially, it ensures that his most important customers get service at the most important times. "If there is a heavy storm where, for example, it snows continuously through the night and we know we can't clear everyone out on time, we have the option of skipping some customers to make sure our top priority customers get done more quickly," he explains.

At Pro Scapes customers are prioritized into three categories according to the services they buy, with Priority 1 customers being those who purchase plowing, shoveling and de-icing services in the winter and full-service lawn and landscape maintenance in the summer. When an unusually heavy event is expected, customers' priority numbers are put on storm routes, site maps and plow logs to ensure the right services are delivered to the right properties at the right times.

#### SPECIFY IN THE CONTRACT

Kier has the leeway to use this system through a contractual *special winter events* clause "that basically says if we're getting fast accumulating snow, wet heavy snow — if we're getting any type of an ice storm, that we're not going to be responsible for getting there at the normal time," he explains.

Moreover, Kier's customers are required to either "sign up" for special winter event services or "opt out" of them. "Our contract specifies that there will be additional costs for dealing with special winter event services," Kier says. "Then we ask customers to initial

one of two boxes. The first box says they want us to proceed with dealing with special winter events; that they understand we're going to charge them extra as we deem fair and reasonable and that they understand it's going to take us longer to get to them. The second box says that in the event of a special winter event they would like us to skip their plowing, to *not* service their pavement at all and that they will contact us about how and when to proceed from there."

During a severe event, customers who opt out sometimes change their minds, "especially when they see one of our pay loaders driving past their property to service somebody else," grins Kier. But if they initialed the second box they also agreed to the stipulation that even if they call during a special event, there will be a significant delay in their services. "This is a big thing for us," Kier adds. "We're not going to turn around and take care of them before people who were signed up for months."

Experienced snow contractors agree that careful planning is crucial to their success and that without it, problems with equipment, staff and materials — not to mention customer misperceptions — can turn an already stressful job into a nightmare. "We take the view that when we're fighting a storm all we want to do is fight the storm. So we're always preparing for it," says Jim Monk of Markham Property Services (MPS) Ltd., a landscaping and grounds maintenance firm in the Markham, Ont., and greater Toronto areas. "On a micro level, we have a preparation cycle

prior to an event to make sure all the stuff we have in place is ready. But going back even further — to the macro level — our plans have to mesh with our customers and our business model," he says. "We look for consistencies to reduce the unexpected when we're out there fighting storms."

#### WHEN NEWER IS BETTER

MPS specializes in servicing commercial properties, including the parking lots at big box stores. "We try and stay out of places where we're obligated to do walkways and front steps, where there's a high shoveling component. We try to mechanize as much as we can and if the job has a lot of hand work it doesn't quite fit with us," Monk explains.

This business model led to an equipment strategy that includes only late model vehicles. "For example, we keep a truck or van for the duration of its warranty — four or five years — and then sell it because this reduces our down time," Monk explains. "If we used old trucks, they might be a little less expensive to run but they're going to break down more often. That's just a fact of life. If we're in the middle of a snowstorm and it's 3 a.m. and some of our fleet's down, we're not just fighting that storm anymore; we're fighting the fact that we don't have all our equipment out there."

#### AVOID THE REVOLVING DOOR

At Jan Gelderman Landscaping of Waterdown, Ont., the largest group of winter clients is multi-residential town homes.

"These properties require a lot of hand shoveling — they're very labour-intensive," says Roy Hummel, the firm's operations manager. "We deliberately go after contracts that require a lot of labour. That's how we keep employees 12 months of the year."

In business since 1955, the firm provides grounds maintenance, turf management and landscape construction in summer and snow and ice management in the winter. An important aspect of its business model, says Hummel, "is to try and avoid the revolving door syndrome, where you hire people who turn out to be good workers but then lose them to year-round jobs somewhere else." Since 1981 Gelderman has implemented an hours banking system, whereby work hours, pay and vacation are set aside from the summer to be applied during the winter, thus ensuring a guaranteed income year round. Explains Hummel: "Our system is based on the assumption that a dedicated worker should work a minimum of 40 hours a week for 50 weeks plus two weeks vacation (in our case one week in the summer and one week in the winter, covered by four percent vacation pay). This is what we guarantee

our employees as long as they are available for work every day they are required. The winter work (16 weeks) averages 20 hours a week; the summer work (34 weeks) averages 50 hours a week. There's an additional bonus that we give to returning employees: for each year of full-time employment they receive one percent more vacation pay to a maximum of eight percent total."

The need for reliable workers has many snow contractors reviewing their hiring practices and offering incentives to attract and retain good people. At ULS Maintenance and Landscaping in Calgary, "we have 120 people in our company on hourly wage rates," says president Steve Wheatcroft. "When they move to the winter we pay them time and a half for work after 7 p.m. So if they get \$20 an hour that's \$30 an hour at night. We get more people wanting to come out and work at night that way."

As winter business grows, so does the need for full time staff. ULS currently services 500 commercial, residential and municipal customers and recently hired a year-round manager to head up the firm's snow and ice division, Wheatcroft says. "I

think the biggest thing for anybody who wants to get into snow is to understand that we didn't really get successful until we took it seriously. It's a full time business if you want to do it right."

Whether hiring full- or part-time employees or subcontractors, consider that no one should be working a shift that is longer than twelve hours, if at all possible. Snow contractors' experiences (along with a mountain of professional literature) prove that the longer people go without sleep, the poorer their decision-making becomes and the more likely they are to get into accidents.

If you can't finance two shifts, you can try to reduce the time spent on the road by making your routes geographically tight and efficient. Richard Kier's tag-team approach is an example. "When you have to bust through a lot of snow and you have small equipment (i.e. skid steers, a pickup truck, or a one ton truck) there's a high likelihood of getting your vehicles stuck," Kier says. "We found that during big storms instead of sending all the trucks out in different parts of town to work independently we'll have two trucks working a single route together. One guy works on one job while the other guy works on the job across the street. This way if one of them gets stuck, instead of it being a 20 minute detour to go and pull somebody out it's just a five minute excursion across the street."

#### PRE-WINTER PREPARATIONS

Once snow contractors have planned their mix of services and developed strategies around equipment and hiring, pre-winter preparations can begin. "We size up new properties sometimes as early as the spring but usually during the summer," says Wheatcroft. "When it's plus-21 degrees in July you can walk around and easily see and mark out curbs, islands, sewer caps and other features of a customer's property. We note everything for our site maps and include photographs of the properties."

When meeting with customers to determine their expectations, the following questions can help establish the time restraints applicable to their properties:

- Do you need access 24/7 during snow and ice events?
- Are you open Monday through Friday only?
- What are your weekend hours?



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- Are you open holidays? If so, which ones?

"Don't forget to ask where they want the snow pushed," advises Jim Monk. "In a straightforward parking lot you'd push all the snow to the perimetres. But if for some reason the customer doesn't want it done like that and wants the snow taken to the back corner of the lot, this adds time and possibly the need for heavier equipment because the further you push snow the heavier it gets."

Equally important is to spell out your services — from anti-icing to curb repair — and make sure that everything agreed upon verbally is included in the contract. A good contract should cover all the bases. "Our contracts are ten pages long," says Steve Wheatcroft.

As early as possible, snow contractors secure their salt and other ice melting chemicals because once the season starts, supplies will be limited. According to Gelderman's Roy Hummel, "We arrange with salt suppliers to let us store what we need and they guarantee us the rest. We don't store the whole season's worth because we're not set up to stockpile salt. If it's been a light winter we come to an agreement about paying the supplier for the salt we used and if there's any left over it's ours for next year."

At Gelderman's, considerable time is spent training and preparing staff. "We definitely have a lot of meetings with all the staff — whether they are doing hand labour, machine work or driving trucks," Hummel says. "We have a big binder containing the lessons learned from previous winters and each year we add to it and review the material."

Some points cover the basics, such as how

*Investing time in properly training staff before a big storm will pay off in an efficient and effective work force you and your clients can rely on when you most need it.*



to pile snow without blocking a drivers' view. Others pertain to specific properties, for example: "Watch out — there are three fire hydrants behind those bushes," Hummel explains.

Staff preparation should also include the use of site maps and plow logs, as well as pre-event rehearsals. At Pro Scapes "each driver is trained on a specific route," says Rick Kier. "The route may be one job or 25 jobs. They're told how to plow it; shown where to put the snow; which way to angle the blade; everything that we can train them about that job is covered."

Kier readies his equipment as thoroughly as his crew. Not only are his vehicles prepared mechanically, every truck contains the following:

- Roadmap
- Toolbox ("with a couple of quarters taped

inside in case a cell phone doesn't work and they need to use a pay phone," Kier explains)

- Jumper cables and tow chains
- Transmission fluid and engine oil
- Spare parts that are particular to the truck and snow plow

"We've even got a can of lock de-icer in our barn where any of the guys can get to it, so when they go to their plow truck and a door is frozen shut they can deal with it," Kier says. All of this is consistent with his philosophy for the firm: "prepare for the worst and hope for the best." **LT**

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