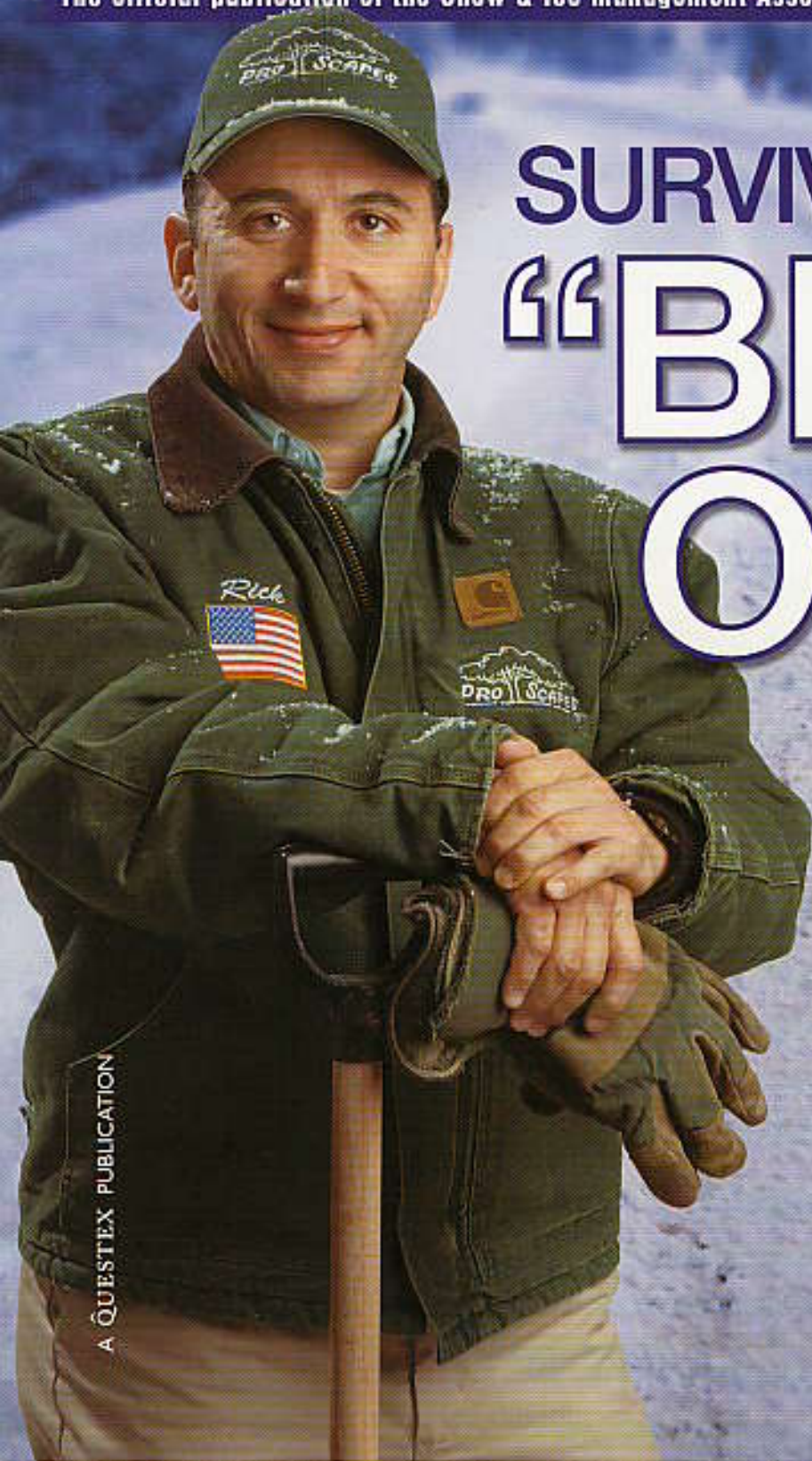


# Snow Business

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## SURVIVING THE “BIG ONE”

Pro Scapes' Rick Kier found out the hard way how NOT to tackle a wicked storm. The lessons he learned transformed his company.

# SURVIVING THE “BIG ONE”

The blizzard of 1993 nearly did Rick Kier in, but he didn't let it bury his company. The lessons he learned have shaped Pro Scapes into a successful snow and ice management firm

BY RICK KIER, CSP

Whoever said “size doesn't matter” clearly was not talking about snowstorms. On the contrary, the bigger they are, the worse they can be to manage. As a snow removal contractor since 1978, I have learned the bigger, longer and warmer snowstorms get, the more difficult my job becomes. Extended work periods, broken equipment, no-show employees, screaming customers and fuel delivery problems all inflate as the snow gets deeper.

Having survived my fair share of incredibly nasty storms in Syracuse, NY, I want to share how I learned to survive the big storms without losing any customers, without having any slip and falls, and without needless worry and stress. I will tell you how we prepare for the big ones, what we do during the storm and the procedures we follow after a blizzard. I want to help you learn from our successes as well as our mistakes. I will tell you how we survived the “Big One.”

## March blizzard

Our “big one” came on March 13, 1993, with the largest snowfall we experienced in one day. Some of the areas we plowed had more than five feet of snow that day. This was our *big* learning opportunity.

As the biggest, meanest, nastiest blizzard of my 28-year career, that storm taught me all kinds of lessons.

It was a day I will never forget. We brought my newborn son, Nicholas, and his tired mom home from the hospital. Needless to say, I was already exhausted from the excitement of welcoming my second child into the world just a few days before on March 10. They were calling for a Northeaster that sunny Saturday morning. The weather forecasters said there might be as much as a foot



or two of snow. Having listened to them cry wolf before, I was ready to wait and see whether the storm would be for real. Little did we know it would become the "Blizzard of the Century."

### **Snowing like cats and dogs**

Around 9 a.m., it started snowing very lightly. It was those little tiny flakes that don't look like they add up very fast. It was still cold and the snow was not slippery. We did not plow until there were three inches or more—which was what our contracts called for. This was a mistake. By the time there were three inches on the ground, it was snowing so hard our drivers took one to two hours or more just to make it to our shop. As the day wore on, the snow just kept coming, and coming ... and coming. We were still on the fringes of the storm that was headed directly at us.

By 1 p.m., we had more than a foot of snow, and it was snowing to beat the band. I got in my truck and tried to plow a parking lot. I made one pass across the front of a restaurant, and when I backed up to take the next pass, I could not see where my first pass had been. I do not mean that it was just white again—with all my years of experience, I could not detect where I had just plowed. It was snowing that hard!

Our two-way radio system was crackling with news of broken trucks, stuck trucks and reports of trucks that just could not push the snow. I knew we were in trouble the likes of which I had never seen. I got on my cell phone (a brick about the size of a shoe box in those days), and called my heavy equipment salesperson. I asked to rent anything he had with a bucket and four-wheel drive. We took the last payloader and the last three four-wheel-drive backhoes he had in stock. It was not enough, but these would have to do. I climbed into one of the rented loaders and stayed there for the duration of the storm.

### **Mashed potato snow**

By the time we got all the equipment, more than two feet of snow was on the ground. It was still snowing hard, but the worst part was the temperature was rising. It was hovering around the freezing mark, alternating between 31° and 33° F. Snow is much easier to plow when it is very cold. The closer to freezing, the harder it is to plow. Not only is the snow heavier, but the snow is more slippery. This makes for a very difficult snow to push. We call this "mashed potato" snow because its consistency is similar to the tasty delicacy.



The Blizzard of 1993 left Pro Scapes scrambling for equipment. Included in its fleet were 10 trucks, one Jeep and a 1961 Walters all-wheel drive six-wheeler with a wing.



This radar image shows the storm that wreaked havoc on Pro Scapes' operations during the blizzard of 1993.

As it snowed more and more and the temperature rose, we were accumulating several feet of wet, heavy snow. Some of my employees were getting calls that their mobile homes were starting to collapse under the weight of this snow. There were calls about family members who were stuck and families who needed supplies. A few of the county municipal trucks had tipped over. They likely missed the road and drove right into the ditch. Top-heavy with sand or salt, they tipped on their sides. No one was injured, but the county decided to pull its plow trucks off the road.

The county had declared a snow emergency and closed the roads about 7:30 p.m. Saturday. It was now illegal for any non-essential vehicles to be on the public roads. According to news reports, police were ticketing anyone who tried to drive. This prompted me to make the next big mistake: I told our drivers to take the trucks and equipment and go home. I figured we could get a fresh start in the morning and have things in order by the end of the day.

### **Up to my neck in snow**

The next morning brought quite a sight to see. As I made my way to the rented payloader, I realized the snow was up to my neck! I fought my way back into the house to call in all the other employees. Most of them told me how they had spent the entire night getting home or solving some crisis that the snow had brought to their lives. They were already exhausted, and we had yet to make a dent in the massive snow removal operation.

We had started out the 1992-1993 season plowing with 10 1/2- and 1-ton trucks, one Jeep and one 1961 Walters all-wheel-drive six-wheeler with a wing. Since the start of this storm, we had lost the Jeep and two or three of the trucks to breakdowns.

Once most of the drivers were out plowing again, we quickly learned that the 1/2-ton pickups could not push the 43-plus inches of snow. They became stuck very easily. The 1-tons could push the stuff, but still had nowhere to put it.

In those days, we plowed mostly driveways and condominiums, with a few commercial jobs mixed in. The concept of pulling up to the garage door and back dragging the snow away was not even a consideration. Because the plows only lifted 12 inches off the ground and we had 43 inches of snow, if you even tried our normal back-dragging technique, you pushed 30 inches of snow against the door. We had to make lots of little pushes off to the sides of the driveway, alternating the sides until we got near the door. In most cases, the best we could do is get within three feet or four feet of the garage door.

To combat the problem of trucks getting stuck every few

Pro Scapes' 1961 Walker six-wheel drive with wing certainly didn't show its age. It helped to cut through the massive snow.



minutes, we had "tag teams." Two trucks worked together on the same street or job and could help pull each other out if one of them became stuck.

The worst place to plow was the edge of the public road, where the municipal plows had made a nearly impenetrable ridge of snow. In some cases, this ridge was more than six feet. We used the loader or the backhoes to bust open the jobs and then sent in the trucks to clean them up.

We had our own gas pump, and we had enough fuel for our trucks to keep going. Diesel fuel, on the other hand, was a problem. Most of the local service stations were closed; and of those that were open, only a few had diesel fuel. We had one pickup truck dedicated to going back and forth, bringing diesel fuel to the backhoes and loader.

### The result

It took us three days to clear what we normally plow in seven hours. Property damage was the worst we had done in years—perhaps the worst of all other years combined—as we dug up lawns, ripped up shrubs and caused all other kinds of damage to objects hidden in the 43 inches of snow.

### Our biggest mistakes:

- Our first big mistake was not getting a head start on the storm. We should have had our drivers in the trucks, waiting for it to start snowing. Although we had been burned too many other times when the forecasters called for snow and none came, if we had gotten a head start, we could have plowed the first six to eight inches from our jobs while the plowing was still easy.

- We should have kept plowing all night instead of sending our employees home when they closed the roads. It is better to plow the same job five times, moving eight inches of snow, than trying to plow it once with 40 inches of mashed potato snow.

- I got into and stayed in a payload. Once I did, it was only a matter of time before communications broke down. Sure, I brought my cell phone and a hand-held two-way radio. But with all the heavy use, the batteries in those devices lasted maybe six hours. I tried to call into our office answering machine and get customer messages, but it was nearly impossible. There were hundreds of messages from people who were not our customers, but suddenly had the urge to become our customer. Once the batteries were dead, all I could do was move snow. I really failed to lead our efforts, and most of our people were just doing what they thought was best, with no coordination.

- Failure to staff the office was one of our largest errors. Our customers were calling in to see when they would be plowed, and they might have been OK with our timetable, except that we had

nobody to answer the phone and tell them the plan. The counter on our answering machine went to 99, and then we just got two flat lines after that. It seems we had hundreds of messages and no one to deal with the customers. We had put all our energy into plowing the snow, and none into communicating with the customers. As people called back repeatedly, you could hear the anger and frustration building in their voices. Even when I stopped in the office to listen to the messages, it took hours to hear them all—there were eight messages from non-customers for every customer call. There was no one to call all these customers back, and I was short on time myself.

- Another mistake was plowing all the residential customers before we started the commercial customers. I had thought that the residential customers would need to be plowed first, as a matter of safety. I thought that some of them could not get into or out of their homes until we plowed. I figured the commer-

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## WHAT'S "NORMAL" IN SYRACUSE, NY?

- 140 inches of snow each year (about 120 inches at the airport). The least snow we have had since I started in this business is 59 inches in the winter of 2001-2002.

- 25 plowable events, 45 de-icer applications. The most times we have plowed in one season is 38 and the least is nine.

- Most of the times we go out to plow, we are removing three to five inches. The minimum trigger depth to activate a full plowing is two inches.

- The term "lake-effect snow" describes the unpredictable, heavy snow we get on a regular basis. Depending on the direction the wind blows as the cold Canadian air mass moves over the warm Great Lakes, forecasters could be calling for a trace of snow and we get a foot. Many times they are predicting snow and we never see a flake.

- Our snow removal season normally runs from Nov. 1 to March 31, but we have had snow as late as May 20. Our chances for a white Christmas are 73%.

## HAVE A BLIZZARD PLAN

Pro Scapes' blizzard plan is kept in a three-ring binder and updated regularly. It helps the firm concentrate on all the right things, and contains:

### Before the storm:

- Have a written blizzard plan in a binder and ready to go.
- Check trucks, fully fueled, add extra ballast.
- Compare tools and supplies against checklist.
- Arrange extra equipment, personnel and subcontractors.
- Stock office with petty cash, snacks, food and drinks, aspirin and fuel.
- Buy spare batteries and 12-volt adapters for all hand-held radios and/or cell phones so they can be used around the clock.
- Set up spare clipboards with routes so they are ready for extra subcontractors.
- Equip each shoveler with a snowblower for deep-snow sidewalk clearing.

### During the storm:

- Call drivers and shovelers early, and have them bring spare clothes, snacks and food.
- Rent spare equipment and subcontractors as soon as possible.
- Have a plow truck accompany each payload to clean up work as soon as payloaders open them up.
- Set up a special team in the office:
  - One dispatcher to manage all field staff.
  - Two communications people to answer the phones, faxes and e-mails that will be flooding in.
  - Limit incoming phone lines to the number of communications personnel in the office. Do not have the dispatcher on the phone with customers.
- The dispatcher runs the show:
  - Tracks every piece of equipment and shoveler on larger dispatch sheet mounted on cork board. Uses push pins with equipment number to mark status of each piece.
  - Highlights jobs that will require payload.
  - Tells every driver what jobs to do and in what order.
  - Bases work on priority, not location or regular route order.
  - Checks for customers who are past-due on accounts.
  - These will be plowed last, if at all. Contract verbiage allows us to delay or suspend service to those who are not current on their payments.
  - Sends out salt trucks only where needed.
  - Decides when each person needs to be sent in for rest or replacement.
  - Checks status of broken or stuck trucks.
  - Estimates times loaders will need fuel.
- Communication staff keeps the customers happy:
  - Answers all calls, regardless of time of day.
  - Returns calls, pages, e-mails and faxes.
  - Works from a written script in blizzard plan.
  - Informs dispatcher of calls from customers.
  - Are prepared for angry customers.
  - Calls commercial customers and asks what their schedules will be in light of the big storm.



Keeps a log of calls and promises made, calling customers back if we are unable to deliver.

- Field staff members make it all happen:
  - Do quick plowing to move bulk of snow
  - Don't go wide or do clean up in storm
  - Don't back drag, since it doesn't work in deep snow
  - Don't stop and try to help non-customers—regardless of how much cash they wave.
  - Pick away at deep snow, a little bit to each side.
  - Call for help when stuck instead of trying to rock out of it.
  - Report to dispatcher the status of every job.
  - Keep paperwork up to date and complete, being sure to mark the date and time.

### After the storm:

- Have drivers check equipment and record on checklist.
- Top off all fluids so we are ready to go out again if needed.
- Office staff must review all paperwork for completeness.
- Evaluate damages and determine when and how to fix.
- Set up special "deep-snow" billing based on:
  - Time on job site.
  - Number of inches compared with a normal plowing.

### Must-have materials:

- Summary and complete checklists of procedures
- List of deep snow-plowing techniques
- Details on what to do if a truck is stuck
- Cork board setup instructions
- List of spare drivers, availability and phone numbers
- List of equipment dealers, including home and cell numbers for after-hours contact
- List of subcontractors, including extras
- List of spare shovelers
- List of towing services
- List of transmission repair shops
- List of spare mechanics
- List of mechanical repair shops

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cial sites could wait. What was the crisis if the local oil change shop could not do a few oil changes on Sunday? Guess I called that one wrong. Many of the commercial sites were very upset because we did not have them done on Sunday or even Monday morning. We lost a whole chain of oil change shops and a few other good jobs because of that mistake.

**Smart moves**

- We called our equipment dealer at home on Saturday as soon as we realized the storm was mean and nasty, to get the equipment we needed to survive. Otherwise we would have been in deep trouble.
- We let the drivers drive the trucks home. If we had not, they never would have been able to come back to work the next morning.
- We did not take on new customers during the storm (or after it, for that matter). We concentrated all our efforts on our regular customers who support us even when there is no blizzard. These are the people who keep us in business year-round, year after year.

**Special events not covered by the above prices:**

- Deep Snow (over 10")
- Ice Storms
- Any winter event that requires Pro Scapes Inc. to use special equipment or techniques, and/or more time to move the snow
- Fast Accumulating Snow
- Wet Heavy Snow

Should one of the above special events occur, I request that Pro Scapes Inc. do the following:

Perform the extra work as soon as possible and charge me as Pro Scapes deems fair and reasonable. I realize that there may be some delay in clearing my area due to the conditions.

OR

Don't perform any work that incurs extra charges without my contacting Pro Scapes and advising you how to proceed. Skip my plowing. I realize there will be a significant delay in the plowing of my area (a few hours to several days, depending on the severity of the conditions) even if I call during the storm.

Nearly all of Pro Scapes' contracts include a blizzard clause, which gives customers the option to pay extra for priority service in the event of heavy snow.

We did not neglect them just to make some quick bucks from all the folks who suddenly wanted to sign on with us.

**Lessons learned**

- Some customers will pay extra for blizzard service. We now have a clause in most of our contracts to cover this. We get each customer to give us instructions about special winter events before the season even starts. In the heat of the storm, we already know what they want us to do. We can skip those who will not pay extra and get to those that will more quickly.
- We have assigned priority levels to all customers. If we are running late because of morning snow, a blizzard or any surprise circumstances, we can go directly to our top-priority customers. We no longer plow in geographic order if we cannot get to all the customers in time. We have three priority levels:

- Priority #1:** The best year-round, full-service customers.
- Priority #2:** Good customers with multiple sites or some year-round work.
- Priority #3:** Winter plowing customers only.

If we find ourselves in a spot where we cannot make everyone happy, we choose who will be happy and who will not. We try our best to never lose any customers, but if we must, we want those to be our lowest-priority customers.

We have found that the best philosophy in the snow removal business is: "Plan for the worst and hope for the best." SB

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