



# Selling to Landscapers

Landscape contractors are demanding, but they have buying power that'll bolster your bottom line. Here's how to grab it.

Joseph Holschuh, Contributing Writer

There's no two ways about it, landscape contractors are demanding. Their equipment is their business, and above all else they are looking for a dealer who is going to be a partner in their operation. They expect constant attention and want to be your top priority the moment they step foot in your door. They expect price cuts, package deals and to be bumped to the head of your service shop, and if you want their business you are going to give it to them.

But there's a trade-off.

They work in high volume, often buying equipment in fleets — and they are fiercely loyal to their dealers. Not only that, but they provide an almost never-ending revenue stream, with every purchase paying dividends in the form of service, parts and repair work.

There is tremendous income potential in the landscape contractor market, but if a dealer wants to capitalize on it, he might have to make some pretty significant — and worthwhile — changes to his operation.

## Simplify to Succeed

While it's easy to think that you have a better chance of selling to land-

scape contractors with a wider selection of equipment, that's only true to a point, says Joel Thomas, a Husqvarna dealer and owner of Oakboro Ag Power and Turf, Oakboro, N.C.

"When a landscaper walks into your store, he doesn't want to see the entire rainbow of equipment," Thomas advises. "Carrying equipment is the easy

**"Once they've bitten on the demo, the sale is basically made..."**

part and vendors are a dime a dozen — these contractors are looking for somebody that really understands their product line. When they come in the store they don't have the time to watch you figure out your equipment."

Instead, Thomas suggests honing in on one or two product lines. By narrowing inventory, dealers are able to better understand how their equipment works and are able to tighten up diagnostics and repair work. A lighter inventory eases the burden on the parts department, increases a dealer's

purchasing power and widens margins. It makes sense on every level, according to Thomas.

He warns that dealers should exercise caution when choosing suppliers to make sure that they offer a complete line of products for landscapers. That's because landscape contractors have the capital that residential customers don't. They understand their equipment needs well enough that they don't often make senseless upgrades. But because of the nature of their business, their needs go beyond a single unit and their steady influx of capital gives them the buying power to purchase entire fleets in a single visit.

With landscapers, sales aren't found by upselling on the whole goods, but by accessorizing their operations with push mowers, trimmers, fertilizing equipment and other equipment vital to maintaining their business.

"Accessorizing landscaping operations makes sense on a lot of levels," says Todd Lane, manager and partner of Lane Sales Power Equipment of Morristown, Tenn. "Anytime a dealer can sell in bulk, he's going to be working in wider margins. Not only that, but various fleet programs allow dealers to offer liberal discounts for purchases of three or more units. Additional inven-



tory going out the door means greater amounts of parts and service work on the way back in.”

For these reasons, Lane tries to fit landscapers with package deals every time they walk into his dealership looking to buy. He educates them on fleet discounts they qualify for at different levels of purchasing. For the equipment that doesn't qualify for fleet programs, Lane shows them how modern equipment can save on labor.

“It's sometimes hard to get landscapers to see things that way, but it opens them up to a whole new level of buying power once they do.”

### Seek Out the Customer

Landscapers, when catered to properly, can prove to be an immensely profitable niche for an enterprising dealer. But they aren't the kind of customer that falls into a dealer's lap. They need to be actively sought out and, once found, need to be constantly cultivated and attended to.

“The absolute best way to attract new customers is to load up a truck and trailer and go where crews are working,” says John McCrimmon, a Hustler Turf dealer and distributor based out of Loveland, Colo. “Get out and mow some lawns with them so you can understand their situation. It's important that they know you understand what they're looking for and helps you better understand the product you're selling.”

McCrimmon speaks from experience. He and his three brothers got their start as landscapers, running four separate crews between 1983-2003. It was only when they couldn't find anybody to service their equipment as well as they could that they launched the equipment side of their business. This background and knowledge helped tremendously, he says.

When meeting landscapers in the field, McCrimmon says it's most effective to teach them how the equipment works and then leave it with them for a few days. Let them run it the way they use it in their business and tell them to drop it off when they're finished,” he says.

When it's returned a few days later,

### Pricing Yourself Into a Deal

As much as Joel Thomas of Oakboro Ag Power and Turf, John McCrimmon of Mac Equipment Inc., and Todd Lane of Lane Sales Power Equipment hate to admit it, price plays a role when selling to landscape contractors.

It seems counterintuitive with a customer base built on relationships and service, but landscapers have their own bottom lines to attend to and with the amount of equipment they're constantly rotating in and out of their fleets, every penny counts.

McCrimmon admits that his dealership has lowered its prices to be competitive with dealerships that have less than stellar reputations.

“We look at it like this: if we can get them through the door we can get their parts and service and start building that relationship for the next sale. I don't like it, but more and more it's becoming tough to get away from.”

“In the ‘every dollar counts’ environment we've been working in for the past couple of years, we're finding more and more landscapers shopping on price,” Thomas agrees. “We try to counter this by giving landscapers their first service for free. It plants the seed that we want to do their service work.”

From there, anytime a landscaper comes in for service work, Thomas makes sure to put a pamphlet in his hand and let him know about the newest units available.

“Commercial landscapers are always coming in for service work, so we make sure they get them the literature and get the wheels turning early. Taking a hit on that first sale hurts a little less when you can lock in a customer for the next one.”

McCrimmon takes him around the dealership — and not just the sales floor. “Show them your parts department and your service shop,” he says. “Introduce them to the technicians

that'll be working on their equipment. These guys appreciate that you're trying to earn their business and see it as a sign that you'll be there when they need you.”

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## Financing Your Customer's Future

It seems that the harder financing becomes to get, the more important it is.

"With the way financing has been going lately, we've had to get creative with the option," says Joel Thomas, owner of Oakboro Ag Power and Turf of Oakboro, N.C. "With some recent changes in tax laws, landscapers are able to depreciate their equipment faster, so financing is becoming more attractive, but it's getting harder to find."

He notes that his manufacturer has recently opened up two additional avenues that customers can explore for financing, but that his dealership has also forged a partnership with a local bank to offer another alternative.

"The rates aren't as attractive, but sometimes it's the only option for one of our customers. Financing can make or break the sale."

Todd Lane, manager and partner in Lane Sales Power Equipment of Morristown, Tenn., agrees. "When a landscaper gets a piece of equipment from us we take financing from step one all the way to done," he says. From the credit application to figuring out the insurance, Lane's goal is to provide a one-stop shop for a landscaper's needs. He says he looks at selling financing the same way he looks at selling accessory equipment — it is just another niche he's able to fill that keeps the customer in his building.

"When a landscaper walks into my store for a piece of equipment, if I can keep him there, I have a better chance of selling to him," he says. "While he's in my store he's my customer, but the second he steps foot outside he belongs to everybody."

Lane looks at it as just one more way to build the all-important relationship with landscape contractor customers. He believes that if he finances a customer, that customer is more likely to return to the dealership for service work because he'll have forged another level of the relationship.

"Financing is more important now than it ever has been," says Lane. "Financing is every bit as important as the service you offer when building a relationship with a customer, and that relationship is what it takes to keep these landscapers happy."



**Equipment dealers are having success with free loaner programs for landscape contractors needing to wait for repairs. Dealers are pleased to lend out their best and newest units, because once the contractor operates the latest and greatest equipment, a sale often follows.**

Thomas agrees that successful dealers chase business, and also had success luring landscapers through his "Pro Days" program. Essentially an open house, Thomas reserves Pro Days exclusively for his landscapers and goes beyond the traditional burger and hotdog fry.

He understands his landscape contractors are busy, so he makes sure his Pro Days bring something to the table besides the usual meet and greet. He brings in experts to talk to them about training and certifications. He even sets up demo units and has technicians run through basic service work with anybody who is interested.

"The best way to get new commercial customers is to keep the ones you have happy from the beginning," he says. "Landscapers don't respond to advertisements, but instead get their information through their competition. They talk to each other and swap equipment for the day, and you can bet that if one of your customers has a problem you can't take care of, every contractor in the area will know about it."

## Brand Your Dealership

It's important to sell your dealership to landscapers before selling them your equipment. Customers can go anywhere to get a mid-mount mower, so the only incentive they have to do business with one dealer vs. another is service. Dealers should focus their sales pitch on the benefits of the deal-

ership rather than the benefits of your equipment line.

"These landscapers are a lot more dealer-loyal than brand-loyal, so if they are able to find a dealership that can respond to their needs, the color of equipment doesn't matter as much," says Thomas.

"We sell ourselves as a safety net," he says. "Every manufacturer makes the same size mowers, so we make it a point to sell our parts and service departments right along with them."

Thomas guarantees that any equipment coming into his shop for repair work will be back in the landscaper's hands in 24 hours. If he's missing a part or has a problem and can't get the unit back to the customer in 24 hours, Thomas provides a fully-featured demo unit for the dealer to use until his equipment is ready.

McCrimmon's guarantee provides a loaner if he can't get a piece of commercial equipment in and out of his shop in 48 hours. To pick up off-season service work, he offers an incentive program that cuts the turnaround down to 24 hours if the landscaper brings the equipment in for full service in the slower winter months.

Because these programs mean that landscapers are regularly bumped to the front of the shop ahead of residential customers, dealers must devise a method to keep other customers happy while still going above and beyond for their commercial accounts.



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Thomas avoid this conflict by segmenting his technicians into residential, commercial and farm machinery groups.

"All of our techs are cross-trained, so if one department gets into a pickle, other techs can help out," says Thomas. "It allows us to make sure that commercial customers get serviced without causing too much of a stink."

The guaranteed turnaround also requires an extensive parts inventory. McCrimmon's \$400,000 in parts allows him to boast a 98% in-stock rate, but leaves him with a lot of overhead. Thomas claims a slightly lower rate, but makes up for it easily by tapping into his manufacturer's parts ordering system which is near 100% and promises next-day delivery.

Lane takes his parts system a bit further. A Cub Cadet program that allows him to return parts he doesn't use allows him to achieve a near-100% in-stock rate without worrying about overhead. For the occasional gaps that show up when there's too much demand for a specific component, Lane has tapped into another source.

"We've had to borrow parts off new machines from time to time to get customers running," he says. "It's easy enough to replace when the part comes in. Because landscapers are convinced they're going broke every minute their blades aren't spinning, we do whatever it takes to keep them moving."

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## The Power of Demos

This "whatever it takes" mentality is a common thread among successful commercial equipment dealers. Nowhere are they happier to bend over backwards for their customers than they are with their demo fleets.

While a dealer might cringe at the idea of not meeting his turnaround guarantee, those who understand the buying habits of landscapers look for every opportunity they can to push a demo unit into the hands of their customers.

Just like McCrimmon trailering up new units and traveling to meet prospective customers, offering demo units to customers while their equipment is tied up with a technician is the perfect opportunity for a sale. "We do everything we can to meet our turnaround guarantee on equipment," says Thomas, "but for the customers we can't get up and running straight-away, we make sure that they get the best piece of equipment we have on our floor."

Thus, the landscaper finds out what he could be running. It's under warranty if something breaks, and if the landscaper likes it, he's going to find it a lot harder to go back to the piece of equipment in his shop.

That's why Thomas isn't discriminating about whom he loans demos out to. He doesn't view it as rewarding customers who have bought from him, but sees it as enticing customers who might. If a customer that has never bought from him is just popping in for service work, Thomas wants to do everything he can to make sure that the customer's next purchase is from him.

"Landscapers are very informed," says McCrimmon. "They know what they're looking for. There's very little opportunity to budge them much on the equipment they're buying."

Put them in a high-end demo unit, though, and a landscaper suddenly doesn't know how he cut grass without it.

"Any time you can get a demo in a commercial landscaper's hands, do it," he says. "Once they've bitten on the demo sale is basically made."

It's a win-win situation that the customer sees as an act of goodwill and the dealer sees as a sale ripe for the picking

## A Profitable Relationship

"Landscapers are a time-intensive sale, but that's just the nature of the beast," observes McCrimmon. "A successful dealer must listen to landscaper's needs and be ready to tackle any problem he's approached with. They might buy entire fleets of machinery at one time, and they need to be very comfortable with every aspect of a dealership before making a decision like that — the machinery, the technicians, the salesmen — absolutely everything."

"These landscapers are looking for motherly love from us," adds Thomas. "They're looking for a dealer that can attend to their every need. They want someone that will give them a hug and say that everything's going to be OK. If a dealer is willing to arrange his dealership so that he's able to do that, he'll be successful." **RLD**