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# EXPLORING EQUIPMENT

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## Ask Hard Questions When Choosing an Equipment Dealer

By Joe McDonald

**A**s a sports turf manager, you need knowledge, flexibility and commitment from your equipment dealer, especially if you're juggling your sports turf responsibilities with overall turf and landscape care for multiple sites. Your equipment may be a mix of old and new, your crew a mix of experienced people and trainees.

Heavy field schedules, erratic weather, limited personnel hours and tight budgets mean you ask a little more from your crew, equipment and equipment dealer. Under heavy-use conditions, even the best machines will have needs such as regular maintenance and parts replacement. Minor breakdowns, and occasionally major ones, will occur.

Games don't wait for you to get your equipment back in operation. Athletes, coaches, officials and spectators show up on schedule, and the field must be ready.

Who are you going to call when one of your units breaks just before a game? Your equipment dealer. If you've taken the time to check out that dealer's equipment knowledge, problem-solving capabilities and commitment to your needs, the dealer will come through.

What you're really looking for from a dealer isn't a casual relationship, but a long-term commitment. For this reason, it's important to take the time to check things out before making a commitment of your own.

To start, "case" the dealer's facilities. Browse through the outdoor display. Check out the showroom and review the inventory in the parts department. Watch how the sales department operates

and how the service department handles customers.

Is the dealer "in the business" when it comes to the equipment you use? How many commercial units are set up and on display? How many are in the dealer's warehouse as backup stock? Does the parts inventory reflect the needs of the equipment on display?

When the dealer commits display space and inventory dollars to commercial equipment and parts, the service

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department is more likely to have a good working knowledge of those units. Who do you want tackling a problem on one of your machines, the technician who has set up and serviced 15 of them or the technician who has set up one or two?

But don't assume that because the equipment is there the dealer's staff understands it. Talk with the manager, talk with the commercial salespeople, talk with parts and service department managers. Ask a few questions about specific machines. Check into parts availability. You're looking for a dealer who understands your business and the urgency of your equipment needs.

Sports turf managers and commercial cutters face many of the same problems. There's a set amount of work that must be accomplished within a tight time-frame, a set crew size and a set number of units to get the job done.

Does the dealer's parts department stock key items, like belts and blades, that could quickly put your units back in operation? For parts that aren't in stock, how fast is the turn around from the dealer order to delivery?

Get to know the service department staff. Watch them operate. You need technicians that are knowledgeable and well-trained — technicians that can analyze a problem and get it right the first time. You need a service department that understands that downtime wreaks havoc on efficient turf maintenance.

When is the service department open? Sport turf crews work early and late. Does the dealer's service department keep a special, longer in-season schedule to accommodate commercial customer or arrange flexible hours for special needs and emergencies? Is there a separate quick-in, quick-out entrance for commercial parts and service?

How does the dealer react when an emergency occurs, like when an engine blows or a transmission gives out? Will the service technicians work extra hours to get the machine up and running again? When you're looking at extended downtime, will the dealer have comparable equipment you can borrow, rent or lease?

If you're working with a specialty unit, and the dealer's backup machine is already in the field, will he or she get on the phone to another dealer to make arrangements to borrow or rent their unit? Will the dealer put you in touch with a turf care operator who works in specialty services?

How special is your problem? How committed is the dealer to solving it? other commercial turf managers in your

area how the dealer has handled their problems.

What about the equipment itself? Does the dealer offer a line of equipment built for the rigors of commercial use? Is the manufacturer well-established and dependable? The cost of turf care equipment reaches beyond the initial purchase price. Value, the cost-to-quality equation, extends over the life of a piece of equipment. Overall cost can be greater for a unit with a lower up-front price that gives fewer use-hours and has more downtime than a machine with a higher purchase price.

Does the manufacturer stand behind the products? Is the warranty program complete enough to be effective? Does the equipment warranty cover the entire machine, or must you go to one source for engine warranty work, another source for transmission work, and so on? Does the dealer have any flexibility in warranty situations? Are extended warranty programs available?

Beyond these daily considerations, think about "extras."

Does the dealer offer periodic service schools to keep your in-house service staff current on maintenance and repairs? Does the dealer offer safety seminars? Does the dealer hold "commercial days" to introduce new equipment?

Can the dealer supply you with records of your parts and equipment purchases to assist in your budget preparations? Can the dealer provide you with an accurate account of all business between the two of you?

Consider financing. Does the dealer offer options to fit the criteria of your organization? Can you lease or rent a piece of equipment that your budget won't stretch enough to buy? Will the dealer submit bids according to your organizations guidelines?

Does the dealer take your needs into consideration when placing his or her own orders? Will the dealer make adjustments to fit your schedule?

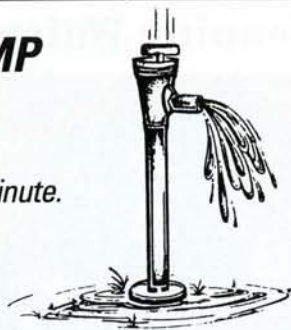
Every long-term relationship has a few difficult moments — perfection is an extremely limited commodity. However, choosing a dealer who is committed to serving your needs will, in the long-run, make your job run much more smoothly. □

*Editor's note: Joe McDonald is a senior marketing coordinator for the John Deere Lawn & Grounds Care Division Horicon Works in Horicon, WI.*

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