



Purchasing tips from industry pros

Purchasing: report from the front lines

By Mike Andresen, CSFM

Lately it seems that getting any purchase past administrators or purchasing agents at our university has become daunting. Three recent purchases that went through the state mandated bidding process were for a wide area mower, an aerifier and a 3-year paint supply contract.

Our athletic director's philosophy that we "hire good people and give them tools to effectively do their jobs" rings sweet to our Facility and Grounds Department. Discussing need for those big ticket tools is not for everyday banter. The only time I discuss purchasing equipment is during the budget process. Don't constantly put your administrator in the position of listening to you cry about the condition of your equipment. And believe me, that's how they hear it. We have a place holder in long-range planning budgets for equipment replacement. If the department wins the lottery I want the boss to easily find a way to spend the windfall through us!

In working with purchasing professionals it's my job to make their jobs easy. Telling an agent we only want a specific brand machine puts that person immediately on red alert. Most purchasing agents have seen most of the tricks so you may as well come in humble and accept their rules. Besides, in our case the state makes the rule and this person is simply the messenger. Kind of like being a turf manager many times.

When we're ready to bid a piece of equipment I personally gather all the specification information on at least three like machines. I'll meet with the agent and be very honest about my professional and our

department's business relationship with distributors and manufacturers. The visibility of Athletics puts us in a unique position for potential gift-in-kind, donation or even sponsorship premiums relative to purchases. Take the time to educate the purchasing agent about the need to offer addendums to your bids that will allow for creative bidding that may benefit both your department and the supplier.

I love trade shows such as the one we have at the STMA National Conference. We draw up the wish list at the conference but we won't consider a major purchase without a demonstration at our facility. Our bid requires a demonstration of equipment and I exercise this right on the low bid or more if a couple bids are close. During demonstrations we'll take pictures and document our thoughts on the performance. The purchasing agent is required to be present during a demonstration and he or she documents comments and conversations as well as asks pertinent questions more related to warranties and contracts. It's impossible to document too much or have too many people watch the demonstration!

During a grueling paint bid process documentation and follow through was critical. Few things are more important to athletic departments than the field presentation for each sport. Paint budgets can be significant. Educate and develop a relationship with your purchasing agent to ensure they understand the importance of this purchase as well as the details, chemistry and nuances of paint materials and their application. Our process of evaluation was complex. All paints (white and colors) were applied at exactly the same ratios. From that point we kept a daily series of photos and a diary of comments on each product. Every couple days the purchasing agent visited the test sight to

make his own observations. When we sat down to compare notes it was striking how similar the observations were. Pre-bid education of the agent made the decision unanimous.

Avoid skirting or playing tricks with the formal purchasing process. Trust is the most important characteristic you carry. Trust with the purchasing agent and trust from the suppliers that they will and do receive a fair shot at your business. Don't waste your time or anyone else's time by being deceitful. Your reputation is on the line.

I've worked in the private sector and now the public. At times it would be nice to just make a call and tell a salesperson, "Please deliver this product" but there's benefit to adding people to your successful team. You are the leader of your team. When the preferred equipment or supply does not come in as the low qualified bid, remember it's not your opinion that ultimately determines if you have a satisfactory conclusion to the process. As it is with most every other aspect of our job, build the relationship first. ■

Mike Andresen, CSFM, is Facilities & Grounds Manager at Iowa State University and past president of the Sports Turf Managers Association.

Purchasing perspective from the director's chair

By Matt Mandia

As with most things in life, a learning curve exists for those who are not familiar with a certain task or profession. This is certainly the case when it comes to educating Parks and Recreation Directors as to the complexities and multitude of challenges encountered by turf managers in keeping sports turf surfaces in playable and sustainable condition.

Although I could be wrong, I don't believe the majority of turf managers have a degree in teaching or in the field of edu-

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cation. But in order to be successful in terms of acquiring the necessary materials and equipment needed in the field, it is essential that you prepare your classroom for instruction each and every day.

Directors routinely rely on the expertise and knowledge of a multitude of areas within the field of Parks and Recreation. Specialties such as aquatic facility operations, park and open space planning, and bicycle and pedestrian trail design to name a few. Turf managers must be at that same level of expertise and knowledge so that Directors feel confident in the information they are receiving to make informed decisions that won't come back to bite them.

In the current climate of tightening municipal budgets and lack of funding for the basic core services of local government, it becomes increasingly more important that turf managers prepare a plan. The plan should include both short term and long-term needs and goals. This plan should be formulated in conjunction with the Director. Whether the Director realizes it or not, he or she is now in your classroom and this is your opportunity to demonstrate how serious you take your profession and to impress upon them, in a tactful way, your knowledge and the foresight you have put into your plan.

This is also the short period of time that you have to educate decision makers on the intricacies of your work. The biggest mistake turf managers can make in making an appeal for a new piece of equipment or large purchases of material during this meeting would be the following statements. If you want to be successful, DO NOT say:

- "Well, so and so School District or Township has one."
- "It would be nice to have."
- "The cab has air conditioning."
- "Although our current machine does the job, our guys don't like it."
- "I realize this piece of equipment is only a couple years old, but the new features on this model are more comfortable."

Although some of these statements may be true and the purchase may in fact increase productivity and produce a happier workforce, you have to understand that Directors must make very difficult budget decisions. These decisions include everything from pool and facility repairs, to programming and special community event obligations that the community expects. A well thought out and presented plan by turf managers must be part of these budgetary considerations in order to be seriously evaluated, and if done correctly, you may just get that new piece of equipment with the bells and whistles.

Here are some tips for success as I see them from the Parks and Recreation Directors perspective.

Plan ahead. If you know you have a big purchase coming up, plan for it, and don't blindsides the Director the year you need it. Look ahead and request it in next year's budget that we will need this piece of equipment. This provides the Director time to contemplate the request and make every effort to make it happen in the confines of all the other capital requests for the department.

Consistently communicate with the Director in terms of

upcoming previously agreed upon purchases of fertilizer, seed and fungicides. This "touching base" approach further increases your credibility of being on top of your job and team approach to keeping your athletic surfaces in premium condition. Show that you are in tune with the budgetary pressures; believe me, it will help you in the long run.

Schedule time to have decision makers out to the parks to provide a first hand account of why you need the things that you have requested. It is a much easier sell on site than from a picture in a catalog. Also, when you encounter turf damage from misuse during wet conditions, or from turf disease, have those individuals come out and look at the situation. Seeing it first hand provides much more of a punch than pictures in an e-mail or written description.

When I started in parks and rec 18 years ago, I knew very little about turf management and the challenges of turf managers. It has become abundantly evident that I have been in our turf manager Bob Piccolo's classroom and didn't even know it. ■

Matt Mandia is the Parks and Recreation Director for Derry Township, PA, which is home to the world famous Hershey Chocolate Company.

What do you need in a utility vehicle?

By Brad Aldridge

In selecting a utility vehicle (UV), you're looking for one machine that "does it all"; the trick is determining how your organization defines "it." By its name of course it offers convenient flexibility, but choosing a UV is about matching the machine to your facility's unique needs.

Start by making a list of primary tasks the UV will need to handle, and then consider which models can best meet those requirements. No need to get something that tows a tractor if that's never going to happen. On the flip side, remember this might be your daily workhorse and you might find that you really need some of the extras.

Distributors can help recommend the right model. In general, sports fields require turf-friendly options such as 6x4 vehicles or turf tires to minimize ground compaction. Additionally, be sure to measure any tight spaces at your facility before you look at specific models; a UV that won't fit through a tunnel can't do its job.

While you can't foresee every future need, considering how a new UV complements your current fleet is important. If another machine goes out for maintenance, can the UV fill in? If another piece of equipment is at the end of its life, could a certain type of UV take its place and do double duty?

Don't forget that that using the vehicle's versatility may require switching between various attachments for different jobs, so take that time into consideration.

Do you need the option of full-time four-wheel drive? What top

speed and cargo box capacities are right for you? Tight turning radiuses an issue? Again, having a clear understanding of the tasks you need to complete will determine your UV needs.

Your mechanics' time is always at a premium, so choose a UV that's easy to service. A machine with sealed bearings and few grease points helps reduce maintenance time. If you have multiple machines, they should share service parts. Consider whether investing in a higher-end machine today might reduce your maintenance costs and downtime in the long run. If cash flow is a concern, leasing options can mean a lower monthly payment.

When choosing a UV, plan for what you want the vehicle to do, and the utility capabilities will support similar-level tasks as they arise. ■

Brad Aldridge is a product manager for John Deere Golf.

Selecting irrigation systems

By Pat Johnston

With so many irrigation products in the market, it's important that turf managers understand what they need before they spend money on a new system. Decide what you expect from a system before you determine a total budget for the project.

The most important decision turf managers can make when considering an irrigation installation or renovation is whether or not to hire a certified irrigation designer, who can ensure that the irrigation plan meets your particular needs.

Whether or not you decide to work with an irrigation designer or directly with a distributor, here the questions you need to ask before making a decision:

- How much does the system cost? What is my return on investment?
- Who is the local distributor representative to contact for service issues?
- What kind of equipment training is included? If something goes wrong with

the system, what parts should I have on-hand for quick replacements?

- Is there a nearby site that has this system installed? Can I visit?
- How long is the system under warranty? What does the warranty cover?

When researching a control system, don't become enamored with all the bells and whistles of a system; it's important to know what features you need for your turf area and then maximize your return on investment by selecting a control system that will get the job done.

Important considerations for a control system include: ease of use; flow management and flow sensing; moisture sensing including integration with an ET-based system; and remote-access control.

Water application

When selecting rotors or sprays, turf managers should consider the following:

- Water window: What gives the best distribution in the shortest window?

• Ease of use: Is the rotor or spray easy to adjust or fix?

• Safety/durability: How will the rotor stand up to everyday wear and tear?

A typical turfgrass system needs 85 psi to operate efficiently. A booster pump is necessary to meet that optimal design requirement. While the upfront price of a booster pump package can seem considerable, the energy savings from a high-efficiency pump can represent thousands of dollars over the life of the pump.

After the irrigation system is installed, it's important to follow the manufacturer-recommended maintenance schedule. A well-designed, properly installed and maintained irrigation system is the best way to keep your turfgrass green and healthy for years to come. ■

Pat Johnston is water management sales resource consultant for Horizon Distributors, Inc.

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