



GIE+EXPO

The GREEN INDUSTRY and EQUIPMENT EXPO

Education Session: Build Beneficial Relationships with Contractors to Build Your Bottom Line

By Tom Crain

Landscape contractors can't exist without equipment dealers and equipment dealers can't exist without landscape contractors. A good landscape contractor-equipment dealer relationship is like a good marriage: interdependent and continuously building each other up as time goes on.

That was the consensus of the straight-shooting, seasoned contractors and contractor consultants on the panel of the 2008 GIE+ Expo's "Build Beneficial Relationships with Contractors to Build Your Bottom Line" educational seminar.

The panel also cautioned contractors to keep their dealer relationship mostly monogamous. Contractors who work with more than even a couple of dealers often get derailed. If contractors buy equipment based strictly on the best price, they end up with a fleet of multiple brands that bring on multiple problems, including difficulties with training in their employees and finding replacement parts.

Kurt Bland, Bland Landscaping Co., Apex, N.C. stays with a single dealer who understands exactly what he needs. His dealer knows how to listen. He comes out to his facility regularly to see what his shop looks like.

Roger Johnson, Fowlkes, Norman & Associates, Dallas/Fort Worth, Tex. "takes two" with his dealer relationships in place for nearly a decade. He relies on one for his knowledge of new equipment and warranty work and the other for having competent mechanics and a good stock of replacement parts.

Two-timing and bullying your dealer partners is strictly taboo. The panel sees too many contractors making it a sport to beat up on their suppliers, viewing them as used car salesman rather than business partners. They also observe too many fellow contractors spending too much time finding the best deals by calling every dealer in town.

Todd Reinhart, Reinhart Grounds Maintenance, Bloomington, Ill., said: "Some contractors will spend countless hours gathering quotes from competing vendors to save a few dollars. It's time consuming and the opportunity costs are significant. You need to ask yourself: 'In the time I spent shopping dealers, how many additional sales could I have made?'" Most likely, too, said the panel, the contractor's "bargain" equipment is most likely going to be a bear to repair, a gas guzzler and close to extinction, making the hunt



for replacement parts difficult.

The panel of matchmakers warned contractors not to "take their vows" with dealers too quickly. Johnson raised a red flag on dealers who rep too many brands at once. "If a dealer reps a rainbow of brands, it's obvious they don't know much about any one of them. Most likely, they won't have the replacement parts or repair knowledge either. The contractor might as well buy from a big box."

Jeremy Eck, Spruce it Up, Springfield, Mo. works with two dealers—one for large equipment such as mowers, and the other for smaller equipment such as blowers and edgers. "I look at how they service our equipment when it goes down. Some of our past dealers took half a day or more to fix our mowers. It never crossed their minds to offer us a loaner. We can't afford to be down for that long. It's unacceptable."

Other good dealer traits include staying in communication and being available. Eck knows he has a good dealer when he gets a call from him even after the sale is done. His dealer regularly checks in to ensure his satisfaction

with the equipment. Bland needs dealers who will accommodate his unconventional schedule—any hours of the day, night or weekend. He won't work with any dealers maintaining bankers' hours.

An equipment dealer-landscape contractor relationship is a two-way street. If a contractor wants to develop a good relationship with a dealer, he must show reciprocal loyalty.

Reinhart strives to be a loyal customer by keeping his purchasing habits predictable. He stays with a single brand in each equipment category. That helps his dealer know what parts to order when planning inventory for the year.

When contractors work with good dealers, they should recommend them to other contractors and clients. And on the flip side, contractors should get business from dealer referrals. "We have clients that may want to perform certain lawn and landscaping maintenance tasks on their own," said Johnson. "If they are looking for a certain piece of equipment, I will send them to my dealer to keep them from using the big boxes. I know they will get good service and appreciate a good referral."

