

Personal service is small firms' hallmark

By Shannon Miller

Ronnie Clapper of **Clapper & Co. Snow & Ice Management**, Minerva, OH, has been moving snow since he was “knee high to a grasshopper.” He said when he was young, if there was snow, his teachers knew he might not be in school that day; he’d be out shoveling.

Similarly, Gary Hietala says his Strongsville, OH-based company, **Hietala Lawn Maintenance, Inc.**, “was more of a hobby that’s grown into a business.” Established in 1993, the company now services 45 accounts.

Make no mistake, small doesn’t mean insignificant. The key, small business owners say, is steady growth that’s realistic to handle. Mike Alexander of **Premier Lawn & Landscaping LLC**, Louisville, KY, says “keeping things small keeps things simple.” Steady growth of 10 to 15 percent per year comes for Alexander mostly through acquiring other landscape and snow removal companies.

Clapper agrees: “We don’t want to grow faster than what we can handle. That’s just a recipe for disaster.”

The personal touch

Another advantage of operating a small company is the ability to build strong personal relationships with property managers and owners. Personal service is the gold standard for smaller companies. Clapper says his customers receive a lot of personal service, which they likely would not receive from a larger company.

“The customer can talk to me personally if they have an issue or a question or if they need me. I don’t sit in an office when it snows,” he says.

To keep his clients in the loop, Clapper uses service report slips for each winter event. After service is complete, customers receive a written report detailing what was completed on their property and any issues that arose.

“Every time we service an account, the customer sees us. We go down the road, and they wave at us. We see them at the football games and they don’t say, ‘Hey, there’s the guy who plows my parking lot.’ They say, ‘Hi, Mr. Clapper.’”

Hietala echoes this sentiment: “My customers know me personally and we have really good relationships.”

To sub or not to sub?

A common concern for the smaller firms is whether to use subcontractors to help service their clients. So far, they’ve been reluctant to take that route.

Especially as a small company, Hietala says: “Quality is most impor-



Ronnie Clapper

tant, and we are fearful of losing it by using subs. We must find some good relationships with subs in the future, but have yet to do this.”

The flip side is the challenge of trying to keep up with a lot of snow, with few trucks and available employees. Last season, heavy snows from 12 to 18 inches per event in much of the Midwest left many smaller companies scrambling to keep up.

Hietala admits, “Last winter it was a challenge, trying to keep people rested and get people out to keep lots cleared. We may not have been ready for last year. This year we’re implementing a blizzard plan, which we didn’t have last year.”

Standing up to the big guys

Another growing pain is trying to compete with bigger companies.

“Going after some of the larger contracts hinders us because we just don’t have the equipment to do them,” Alexander acknowledges.

Clapper agrees: “Competing with the big guy is tough because they have unlimited resources. It’s sometimes hard to convince the client that we can give the same service as someone with 30 trucks.”

It’s worth it

Since owners of smaller companies are in the trenches during a storm, all expressed the value and appreciation of having a very supportive family behind them.

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Gary Hietala



Mike Alexander

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Crawling out of bed at 2 a.m. to plow when your children and wife are sleeping can be disruptive to home life, says Hietala, whose father steps in to help if there is a heavier snowstorm.

Ultimately, though, each of these men enjoys what they do tremendously. Clapper summed it up best: "I think people who plow snow are just a different breed of people, like cops and firefighters. Sometimes it's the most peaceful thing to me when it's 2 in the morning and it's so quiet and you're plowing." And he is passing his love of snow on to future generations. He occasionally takes his son, who is a little over a year old, plowing with him. And he says, "He loves plowing with me from his car seat." **SB**

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