

Boost Your Bottom Line



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Improved vehicle safety can help save expenses in the long run

As any business owner knows, sometimes it's the small stuff that leads to big problems. Whether during tough economic times or the busy growing season, it can be tempting to postpone routine chores and standard business practices.

That's especially true when it comes to matters like vehicle maintenance and operator training. Skipping an oil change or a safety meeting may seem like a quick way to tighten up the bottom line or save time, but a few shortcuts today can translate into major expenses tomorrow.



Lawn Image Landscaping implements its vehicle maintenance program in the company's shop.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAWN IMAGE LANDSCAPING.

Safety and the lawn care industry

The lawn care industry is sometimes overlooked when considering worker injury and fatality statistics. According to The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, www.cdc.gov/niosh/), a division of the Centers for Disease Control, landscape jobs, including those in the tree care industry, represent about 0.8 percent of American employment. However, 3.5 percent of total on-the-job fatalities occur within the sector.

Between 2003 and 2006, an average of 197 landscape employees died due to work-related injuries each year. This rate of about 25 deaths per 100,000 workers is comparable to the agriculture and mining industries. While more than one-third of these casualties involved tree operations, many occurred during activities such as tool operation, repair and construction. About 40 percent took place at a private residence.

Fleet safety

The second highest incidence of worker deaths were related to vehicle or transportation operations. About 25 percent occurred on public roadways. The busy season of May through September saw higher rates of fleet-related fatalities.

“Unlike other small businesses, lawn care people move from job to job, and that creates a larger opportunity for accidents or incidents,” says Alan Marceau, owner of Lawn Image Landscaping (www.lawnimage.com) in Clayton, N.Y. “[Vehicle] safety is maybe more important than in other industries.”

While Lawn Image, like many lawn care firms, has been fortunate not to have experienced any fatal accidents, the company did face problems with its fleet. Even a minor incident can put a crew behind schedule.

“We had a few years with several accidents,” Marceau says. “Some were due to human error, some were mechanical, but all were unacceptable.”

Lawn Image, which Marceau started as a part-time venture while in college, has been a full-time, year-round operation since 2006, offering design/build, lawn maintenance and ice/snow management. The company employs three permanent and three seasonal workers. He was prompted to focus on fleet safety when he joined the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET, www.landcarenetwork.org) in 2008. “Since we’re a small company, the help of PLANET made it easier. The group provides guidelines and referrals for additional assistance if needed,” Marceau says.

Starting point

A cost-free resource such as PLANET’s STARS (Safety Training Achieves Remarkable Success) Safe Company Program provides step one for companies eager to improve safety in their fleet and overall operations and reduce the risk inherent to a lawn care firm. The initiative to recognize and control hazards and conduct targeted employee training helps prevent accidents, injuries and equipment failure. Other benefits include earning clients’ respect and recognition, worker loyalty and increased profits that come from improved operating efficiencies and lower insurance costs.

STARS offers a turnkey, customizable safety program, new employee orientation guidelines, worker materials in English and Spanish, print and web-based training, and updates and mentoring by industry experts.

Additional resources are offered by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA, www.osha.gov) and insurers such as CNA Financial Corporation (www.cna.com).

Fleet maintenance

Fleet maintenance is easy to overlook, but a quality program can reduce costs such as insurance, prevent fatalities and injuries, reduce the risk of vehicle breakdown and improve public image. There are many methods of

managing vehicle care, depending upon the company and fleet size, budget, vehicle age and other considerations.

Marceau, for example, runs a fleet of five Chevy and Ford trucks, ranging in age from three to 21 years old. He has opted to maintain vehicles in the company shop. He initiated his enhanced maintenance program by putting every vehicle through rigorous inspections in the shop. "We looked at the vehicles to improve the maintenance of tires and brakes to help prevent future accidents," he says. "That costs money, but is well worth it. Being proactive is key."

For those who wish to contract for maintenance, a number of well-known vehicle service centers offer fleet management. An outside source will provide some tracking as well.

Safety may be further optimized when maintenance plans consider the unique conditions in the company's geographic area. Cold and snowy regions require winterization steps, while tropical areas need to prepare for heavy winds and rain. If salt is used on roadways, vehicle undercoating and regular cleanings may extend useful life. Flood-prone areas may invest in onboard floatation devices to protect employees when rising water threatens.

Regardless of who plans and completes service and repairs, a solid record-keeping system is vital. A method to schedule regular maintenance and document it helps ensure the fleet is in the best possible shape. Records back you up if warranty repairs are needed, and could save your business in the event of a serious accident or injury.



Alan Marceau, owner of Lawn Image Landscaping, earned PLANET's most improved fleet safety award in 2010.

Old school pencil and paper may serve a small company well. Simply recording service work in an owner's manual or ledger and putting a calendar to work may be adequate for small fleets. However, many of us are now accustomed to managing our lives with electronic devices and online services. There is no shortage of options for paperless tracking.

Fleet management software

Today's management programs can handle a multitude of tasks. To assess your needs, evaluate your current processes, programs and staff capabilities. Consider the input of all who contribute to the maintenance effort, including accounts payable personnel. What do you want the application to do? Who will use it?

A budget-friendly tool is putting existing software to another use. Those who use Microsoft Excel or Intuit Quicken or QuickBooks for financial tracking could analyze costs with those programs. Comprehensive software that provides documentation, analysis, scheduling and more is another option. These products range from free downloads to more elaborate systems. Interested in monitoring fuel use and accidents? No problem. Want to analyze overall fleet

costs as compared to individual vehicles? You got it.

No-cost programs offer maintenance and inspections alerts, service record management and cost tracking. AutoVIP Fleet Maintenance Management Software (www.fleet-log.com) says its program has the only available tool for calculating and comparing service due dates by both days in service and miles driven.

If you choose to purchase software, there's an array of options available. Applications have been designed to track individual components, such as tires, and provide mapping capability, key performance indicators and risk management. Reports may be generated by lifetime and replacement costs, with options for customization. There are even online tools to choose the product right for your business; [www.capterra.com/fleet-](http://www.capterra.com/fleet-management-software) management-software is one example.

Operator selection and training

Marceau says a vital element of his vehicle initiative is operator training, and he's put an emphasis on tailgate safety meetings. "If someone wants to do this and money is tight, it doesn't cost much to have these meetings," he says. "It just takes an hour to update workers."

An overall safety effort begins before an operator jumps into a company vehicle for the first time. Many companies choose to evaluate potential employees based upon valid driver's license, motor vehicle record and/or drug tests. Fleet management software can track these factors on an ongoing basis. It can also be used to monitor training and efficiency.

Training that includes not only the ins and outs of a particular vehicle, but also sets an expectation of continual monitoring can be a valuable investment. Marceau asks for daily inspections to reduce the risk of mechanical failure and accidents. A staff that is encouraged to report potential problems helps to keep the entire crew safer.

"Employees recognize our step in the right direction for their safety. When employees understand how things work and that you care about them, they take better care of vehicles and equipment," Marceau says.

"Customers see that safety is a priority," he adds, "and are not worried about accidents at their homes."

He cited PLANET's STAR program for providing educational resources and a structure to help implement safety training. The group also offers pertinent topics for tailgate meetings.

Results

The payoffs for improved vehicle safety can be many. In the case of Lawn Image, Marceau's goal was to reduce accidents and medical and equipment costs. He says his company cut its incident rate from several annually to none. In addition to earning the STAR designation, he was recognized in 2010

with a PLANET safety recognition award for having no days missed from work and no vehicle accidents the prior year.

How does that stack up against the competition? Lawn Image was commended with PLANET's Most Improved Fleet Safety honor last October at the organization's green industry conference in Louisville. The award goes to the U.S. firm showing the greatest progress in safety.

"It was a great honor to be recognized as the most improved in the entire country," Marceau says. "There's lots of great companies, and for our small company to be noticed meant a lot."

Based in Greensboro, N.C., the author writes articles about horticulture, landscaping, agriculture and travel. She has been a contributor to Moose River Media publications for five years.