

Your 5-Step Game Time Snow Plan



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Wrap up the snow & ice management pre-season and be ready to go on the attack

Last fall an early blizzard caught many snow and ice management companies in the U.S. Northeast and New England unprepared. Still finalizing fall cleanups, snow on Halloween wasn't on their minds. Contractor after contractor told stories of how plows weren't ready, deicing materials hadn't been delivered, and, in some cases, contracts hadn't even been signed.

With so many details to attend to when switching from fall to winter operations, it's easy to fall behind – but doing so puts companies at a disadvantage that can prove costly and even fatal to the business.



Corrosion is one of your vehicles' biggest enemies. Go into the snow season with vehicles that have been properly cleaned, serviced, greased and lubricated. The reliability of your vehicles is obviously vital to your winter service.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BLUE MOOSE SNOW.

"Being prepared is everything," says Louisville, Ky.-based Mike Mason, CSP, vice president and chief operating officer of The Lawn Pro. "In an industry where there are so many variables that you can't control, being ready is one you can. Getting caught unprepared is a terrible way to start the season. If you stumble out of the gate you've jeopardized your customer's confidence in you, and that relationship may not recover."

As the clock ticks down toward winter, much should already have been done in terms of preseason preparedness. If your company is behind, it's time to switch gears and take charge of your winter operations.

1 Sign-up the stragglers

By the time you read this, you should already have wrapped up your sales

season. The amount of work you sold has a direct impact on equipment and materials planning and purchasing, routing, staffing, etc. How can you prepare if you're still selling?

The reality, unfortunately, is that too often customers and prospects aren't thinking about snow in late summer. Their reluctance to sign contracts in August and September puts the contractor at a disadvantage, but those who have secured the bulk of their business and have begun strategic operations for the winter will know whether they can take on the additional business from a foot-dragging prospect.

Neal Glatt, CSP, account executive for Case Snow Management in Attleboro Falls, Mass., says because of all the preparation that must take place post-sale, the company tries to wrap up all sales by Oct. 1.

"It is in our best interest to be on top of things so that when those last-minute calls come in we can take on the work if it makes sense," he says, adding that he makes it clear to unsigned prospects they risk being turned away or a rate increase – especially if they come calling as a snowstorm approaches.

Turning away work can be difficult, but Cleveland-based Blue Moose Snow Co.'s Doug Freer, CSP, says keeping your focus on existing loyal customers is worth the risk.

"The question becomes can you add those additional customers without negatively impacting your current clients?"

2 Get your gear ready to go

By now, any additional equipment that might be needed for the upcoming season should be ordered, rental agreements finalized, and deicers purchased and scheduled for delivery (if they haven't already arrived).

Ordering early shows clients you are ready, but it also can mean substantial savings.

Michael Merrill, CEO of Glens Falls, N.Y.-based North Country Snow & Ice Management, says his operations team began finalizing rentals in August and purchased new equipment to take advantage of better pricing and shipping costs. To secure deicing materials, he locked in salt pricing in the spring.

Buying during the preseason can save a contractor hundreds or thousands of dollars, he says: "There is no related expense to those savings. The money saved goes straight to the bottom line."

In addition to equipment and materials purchasing, now is the time to make sure existing equipment is in good working order. The key, Freer says, is good postseason maintenance.

"Servicing the equipment as soon as it comes off in the spring is a must. Otherwise, you're behind the eight ball. If you have equipment that isn't used in your landscape business, there is no reason it shouldn't be serviced

and ready to go,” he says.

Glatt agrees, but knows that may be difficult for companies that have smaller fleets still being used for fall cleanups.

“It’s a big issue for a lot of people. As soon as we hear about a frost, the sanders go on the trucks. Everything gets checked, tested and calibrated. The first storm is always a bit of a panic, but you only get one chance to make a first impression.”



Snow management pros have to assemble a range of vehicles and other equipment because no two properties are identical and each presents its unique challenges.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NORTH COUNTRY SNOW & ICE MANAGEMENT, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.

3 Is your team game-ready?

Companies that employ seasonal workers and subcontractors should be finalizing personnel decisions, setting routes and preparing for training.

At Case Snow, Glatt says, everyone who works for the company in any capacity is trained every year. Safety videos from the Snow & Ice Management Association (SIMA) are viewed and hands-on training is required.

Mason says once all the equipment is serviced and ready to go, The Lawn Pro throws a preseason cookout to get everyone on the same page and thinking about what’s ahead. The company trains its teams in the shop, on the equipment and onsite. The company also trains throughout the year.

“We spend a tremendous amount of time training. Our fall and winter seasons overlap for awhile and it’s very difficult to get a lot done,” he says. Because The Lawn Pro operates in a low-snow environment, its employees don’t get a lot of hands-on time. “They know what they’re doing, how to operate, etc., but a lot of it is repetition and practice. Training helps keep them fresh.”

From a training standpoint, Freer says it’s important to know your legal limitations as to what you can provide your subcontractors.

“You cannot train your subcontractors, but you can inform them of your expectations – and those of the client. It should be clear what sites they are responsible for, their duties, any documentation requirements, etc.,” he says. “We also verify their equipment readiness. When they sign our contract, I inspect their vehicles and make sure that what I’m paying them for is ready to go.”



Depending on available space at your yard, it may pay you to develop and set aside an area protected from the weather to take advantage of off-season prices for products, such as salt.

4 Finalize your game plan

During the sales process, or shortly after, it is important that onsite visits are scheduled with the property manager or the person to whom you'll be reporting during an event. Walk the site, note any problem areas, identify where snow is to be placed and any other special requests from the client. Address any existing damage as well so you're not on the hook after the snow melts this spring. Create site maps based on your discussions.

"Some clients want certain things certain ways. Understand what the customer expects from the billing, paperwork and documentation. Have that conversation in advance so everyone is aware. You don't want to finish a big job and then realize you didn't take a required photo and don't get paid," Glatt says.

Now is the time to stake sites and drop equipment that will be stored onsite. Route planning should also be underway. Make sure all contact information for clients and employees is updated and communicated to all pertinent employees, subcontractors and supervisors.



Nobody can afford to stop and clean the equipment when the snow is flying, but it has to be done when opportunities arise. Cleaning prolongs the life of gear and keeps it operable when it's most needed.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BLUE MOOSE SNOW.

5 Defense! Defense! Defense!

Protecting your company from liability is paramount, which makes the risk management aspect of preseason preparation essential. Attorney Darryl Beckman of The Beckman Group cautions to leave no stone unturned. Among the key components to consider:

- **Customer contracts.** "You should perform no service without a contract," he says. Essential elements to include are price for services, scope of work (including set accumulation when snow clearing and deicing services will begin), and inspection responsibility.
- **Subcontractor contracts.** If your company uses subcontractors, you must have a contract in place with each of them. As with the client contract, the sub agreement should specify what services are to be performed and when, as well inspection responsibility.
- **Insurance.** Make sure all insurance coverage is in place, including proof of insurance coverage from your subs. Workers' compensation should also be updated and finalized.
- **Documentation procedures.** The best way to protect your company from liability and billing disputes is to document your services. Whether it's a paper- or software-based system, a process must be in place that documents your work, including dates and times of service performed, equipment and materials used, etc.

Preseason preparation can seem overwhelming, but it takes discipline and a proactive plan to keep the process in check. With so many aspects of

readiness to tackle, it is wise to identify who is responsible for preparedness task implementation, to establish checklists and to make sure processes are successfully completed.

“All of these things happen and if you don’t plan for them, you’re allowing them to happen to you and take away from operation’s success,” Merrill says. “I talk to contractors who love their landscaping business but they jeopardize it because they wait too long to put their snow plan into action. Don’t let your snow program harm your core business.”

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