

Winnipeg, Manitoba, 3 a.m. at the JRoss Construction & Landscaping Ltd shop. Another winter storm is blowing. It's minus 32 degrees Celsius with winds gusting to 50km/h. The forecast differs based on which source you check. The heavy equipment operators gather around and create their own opinions based on the averages of all sources or maybe who is most trusted with these sorts of things. Someone cracks the classic joke, "Meteorology is the only profession in which you can be wrong nine out of ten times and still keep your job". Coffee mugs and red bulls fully stocked, the crew rolls out into the night for what may be a 12, 14 or even 20-hour shift.

The truth of the matter is as a property manager or condo board you have many options for a snow contractor. How do you select the right contractor for the job? How can your communication flow affect your service level? My objective in this article is to share some insights into the operation of a snow removal company. Through some entertaining stories, we can illustrate how you select the right company and how you can ensure you receive prompt and professional service. We always say, when you don't notice us is when we are providing the best service. When you roll out of the parking garage the snow removal shouldn't be of any concern, at least until you hit the city streets!

Snow Removal is much like an orchestra. We have many different musicians each doing a different thing, each following the sheet music and the direction of the conductor to create a beautiful song. What are the instruments? Equipment like skidsteers, front-end loaders, truck plows, graders, dump trucks, sanding trucks, paddle blowers, backpack blowers and the tried and trusted shovel. As with a trumpet, there is a beginner model and a professional model. The

quality and productivity will be noticeably improved based upon the model, condition and age of your snow removal equipment. For example a 2005, John Deere 317 operates at a single speed 10km/h; it can handle a bucket with a capacity of a half yard. A 2015 John Deere 324E operates at two speeds with a max ground speed of 20.5km/h and a bucket capacity of just over 1 yard. This means the same category of machine is 4 times as productive and could possibly be billed at the exact same rate.

The sheet music will depend on the sophistication of the contractor. Do they use GPS trackers in equipment, aerials and site plans of the properties, routes with work logs? Preparation makes things run much smoother resulting in higher productivity. The end result to the customer is service that is more prompt and higher quality snow clearing. What about the song itself? Do you even like this type of music? It is important to have a discussion prior to hiring a company at all. What is your general budget? Do you require hand shovelling or just machine work? What are your expectations in regards to time lapse from end of snowfall to completed clearing? Is sanding and hauling upon request or when needed? It is very helpful to discuss clearing and hauling timing during the tendering process. Better yet, write it into your desired specifications and provide written instruction. Align your properties budget with your expectations. If you have a low budget don't force a company to cut corners or break contract obligations to make a profit. This will only perpetuate the cycle of new contractors coming into the field year after year with poor service a guarantee!

Back to the music. What about the conductor? Does your contractor have 24/7 dispatch? Companies that are prepared



will always have management closely watching progress through routes and adjusting schedules based upon many different factors. Experience goes a long way in organizing the resources available to the company and dispatching them in an appropriate way to match all customers' expectations. Snow removal in Winnipeg and similar climates is very difficult as a business model. In British Columbia, a contractor may have 8 properties, he knows every day or two he will need to service his customer. He can staff regular shifts and plan the workload accordingly. In Manitoba, we may get no snow for 2-3 weeks and then we get 20-40cm over 2-3 days in a blizzard. In order to profitably operate, Manitoba companies take on many properties to cover overhead and keep staff employed through the winter. Poorly managed companies will stretch resources far too thin with the result being poor service with long wait times.

It wouldn't be uncommon to hear complaints. A condo board may switch contractors every year looking for better service to no avail. So what is the secret to ensure your expectations are met or exceeded? Know your contractor - ask for equipment lists, staffing lists and references. If at all possible, work on a contract basis. Customers who pay to have a contractor on call are always going to get better service. You allow the contractor to pay staff salary and have equipment ready to go to serve you on a moment's notice. Hourly pay is feast or famine and you can be assured companies who have a heavy on-call portfolio will surely be stretched during blizzard periods when you need them the most.

Communication, preparation and trust are the three most important factors in a successful, long-term relationship with your contractor. We are always working toward multi-year contracts. If everyone is happy, there is no need to change contractors. This allows your contractor to get to know the property, how the snow blows through, where to pile, where hidden curbs are. Better yet, after years of service, eventually many of their staff are familiar with the property too. Dispatch can inform the new operator that beside stall 213, Mr. Jones unloads his groceries; he has mobility issues and is very vocal about the level of cleanliness. This removes complaints from residents and reduces workload for on and off site managers. As we get to know our customers and their expectations, we can prepare ahead of time to make sure minimal concerns arise.

HERE ARE TWO VERSIONS OF A STORY ON PARKING LOT SANDING:

- 1) At 10 p.m. on a Thursday night we have our manager out in his truck touring properties checking their conditions. He provides dispatch a list of properties, which require sanding. At 2am, a sanding truck is dispatched with salt/sand mix. Properties that require sanding are all serviced by 8 a.m.



- 2) At 9 a.m. the dispatcher contacts a property manager (sanding upon request) and informs them of slippery conditions at their property. They decline the service. The sanding operator finishes his shift and clocks out. At noon, the same property manager calls and explains they've had a slip and fall reported. They need sanding immediately. The original operator has already completed his 12-hour shift and so another operator needs to be called in. By the time he or she starts the truck, loads with sand and gets to the property from the shop, 3 hours have elapsed. As a proprietor of a snow removal company for the past 15 years, this to me is a quintessential example of lack of trust in your snow removal professional, resulting in a bad resident experience.

The properties who allowed the contractor to sand on their experience as necessary were serviced by 8 a.m. and covered their liability in regards to slip and fall. The decision made by the other property has resulted in an accident and this property wasn't serviced until 3 p.m. This time can actually be exaggerated during a blizzard condition. Operators hit legal time limits for working hours very quickly. If this contractor needs to subcontract this, sand application, wait times could be as high as 6-10 hours.

Buy your tickets to the concert you want to attend. If lots of other people have said good things, you probably will too. Enjoy the beautiful snowfall, and if you do, I am sure you will be a long-time fan of your "Orchestra". 🍁

AS WRITTEN BY JAMES ROSS
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