

SERVICE DEALER

THE VOICE OF THE INDUSTRY

May/June 2024

- News
- Industry
- Dealers
- Training
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- SME Digest

THE LAWN INDUSTRY IS FRAGMENTED

So says the Lawn Association's David Hedges-Gower, who tells us how the dealer network has a vital role to play

DOE SHOW '24

Discussing trade-ins and used machinery

NO MOW MEDIA

Why isn't specialist kit featured in the consumer press?

OPINION

Is it time for dealers to embrace battery?



**CELEBRATING THE
PAST, LOOKING
TO THE FUTURE**

Ripon Farm Services and Devon Garden Machinery celebrate milestones and make plans

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Letter from the editor Steve Gibbs

steve@servicedealer.co.uk



Welcome to the May/June 2024 edition of *Service Dealer* magazine.

We have a cover story this edition that approaches the industry from a slightly different perspective - but one which is of utmost importance to any business that deals in grass machinery. We hear from the Lawn Association, who tell us why it's vital to promote best practice in the ongoing care of our green spaces - and why this directly benefits specialist dealers.

Elsewhere, it is unfortunate that, this issue, we must report on multiple dealerships collapsing during the opening months of 2024. It's always a sad situation when any business closes its doors for the final time. Our thoughts immediately turn to the workers of the affected dealerships who have lost their jobs.

We hope that the team members made redundant aren't lost to the industry, finding placements elsewhere in the sector as soon as possible. Retention is hard enough as it is, without experienced people being forced out. We wish them all the best.

Without getting into specifics of individual cases and particular circumstances, it does give rise to an inevitable question - are these events just a coincidence of timing this spring,

or are there deeper, underlying industry issues that are coming to a head this year, affecting certain dealerships' ability to trade effectively?

There is a school of thought that says that, due to the trend across recent years - particularly in the agricultural machinery sector - of major manufacturers consolidating their dealer networks into fewer, larger groups, smaller dealers are left in a vulnerable state, finding themselves without a major franchise to represent.

Equally, though, I've had industry experts tell me that these changes to the overall tapestry of the dealer network should not be to blame for individual businesses going under. Quite the opposite, in fact. There is belief that the mergers into so-called 'super-dealers' have prevented some businesses from going broke.

One experienced individual told me: "There is certainly a consolidation trend, but I don't think it leads to a shrinking industry - just a changing one."

Another opinion I've heard suggests there's simply a shallower pool of customers these days, especially in farming circles. Therefore, there's a reduced base for the network to sell to.

Whatever you think the reason might be, some stability for the rest of the season would most certainly be welcomed.

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DEALERS

Dealerships collapse

Administrators and liquidators called in at two established businesses

The opening months of 2024 saw two established agricultural and outdoor power machinery dealerships collapse – with a question mark over a third at the time that this magazine went to press.

Firstly, **Suffolk Agri Centre** – based at Fen Road, Pakenham, Bury St Edmunds – closed its doors and entered liquidation, after trading for more than 35 years.

Local news site *SuffolkNews* said liquidators McTear Williams & Wood Ltd were appointed on March 7. A spokesperson for the liquidators was quoted as saying: “Suffolk Agri Centre Ltd closed its doors on February 19, and all 11 staff were made redundant on the same day after over 35 years of prior trading.

“Hayley Watson and Andrew McTear, of McTear Williams & Wood Ltd, were appointed joint liquidators of the company on March 7, and are in the process of auctioning the company’s plant, machinery and stock in order to realise assets for the benefit of creditors.”

The dealership featured in *Service Dealer* in May 2019, when they started selling McCormick tractors once again (having previously supplied McCormick products from 2007 to 2013). The company also sold Amazone, Krone and McConnel products, amongst other agricultural brands.

Following the news of Suffolk Agri, another dealership entered administration – but, in the first instance, continued trading to a limited degree under the control of joint administrators.

Aberdeenshire-based dealers **Balgownie Ltd** appointed Richard Bathgate and Graeme Bain, of Johnston Carmichael, as joint administrators on March 15 this year.

The BBC reported that 24 employees lost their jobs with immediate effect, with 17 workers retained to help try and sell the company’s assets.

STV News, meanwhile, quoted the dealership’s managing director, Mike Singer, as saying: “As a result of cashflow issues, the board of directors is deeply saddened to announce that

we have had to make the difficult decision to appoint administrators to the company with immediate effect.”

One of the administrators, Richard Bathgate, issued a statement describing Balgownie as “a well-respected company known for its outstanding customer service.”

He continued: “It has a trading history as far back as 1907, and is known for its quality and outstanding customer service.

“Unfortunately, following the identification of cashflow difficulties, the board of directors has had to place both Balgownie Ltd and Balgownie Rentals Ltd into Administration.”

On the initial notice pinned to Balgownie’s website, the Administrators said they were assessing the stock and asset position at each of the sites operated by Balgownie “to determine whether the business may be in a position to continue to trade in the short term, under the administrators’ control, whilst a purchaser is sought for the business as a going concern.”

Limited trading

On March 21, however, a new notice from the administrators appeared, stating that Ifor Williams Trailers products and parts remained for sale through Balgownie (under administration). A statement from Carole Williams, director of Ifor Williams Trailers, said: “We have moved rapidly to work with the joint administrators of Balgownie Ltd to minimise disruption to our customers, and we are pleased to announce that our well-kept trailers and genuine parts continue to be available for sale from Balgownie Ltd through its joint administrators.”

Richard Bathgate added: “The Ifor Williams Trailers team has worked rapidly and thoroughly to ensure any disruption to their customers was minimised, and we are grateful for their rapid assistance.”

At the time of going to press, most other product categories on Balgownie’s website remained blank.



Suffolk Agri-Centre directors Ken Grimwood (left) and David Eley in May 2019, when the dealership returned to supplying McCormick tractors



Balgownie’s md, Mike Singer (right), and sales manager Stuart Allan pictured in January 2023, when the dealership took on the Mean Green and Altoz mower ranges

EVENTS

Theme announced for *Service Dealer* Conference

Taking place in November

We’re gearing up for another exhilarating conference this November and are excited to announce this year’s theme - ‘Driving Success’.

The 2024 event will be building on the success of the 2023 Conference and Awards, which saw an impressive 20% increase in delegates, attracting dealers from across the UK. The event theme will take a closer look at innovations and strategies to support dealership management.

Featuring keynote speeches from renowned business professionals, customer insights, interactive workshops, and networking opportunities this year’s conference promises to inspire, educate, and equip dealers with the tools and strategies necessary to thrive in an ever-evolving landscape.

Speaking about the event theme, *Service Dealer* owner, Duncan Murray-Clarke said, “We are excited to announce Driving Success as this year’s conference theme. Our goal is to provide attendees with key information and actionable takeaways to help drive



their business to success in today’s challenging environment. Ultimately, helping today’s dealerships to work smarter, not harder”.

Each year the *Service Dealer* team reviews feedback from previous events, working to tailor the event to the needs of delegates and this year is no exception. It is this attention to detail that has established the *Service Dealer* Conference as the premier event in the industry, attracting dealership owners, managers, and key stakeholders seeking to stay ahead of industry trends and foster business growth.

The *Service Dealer* Conference & Awards takes place on **Thursday 28th November 2024**, once again at the Crowne Plaza, Stratford-Upon-Avon.

For more information on how you can be a part of the event and to stay updated on conference news visit www.servicedealer.co.uk or follow us on social media @servicedealer.

INDUSTRY

STIGA to support 90 community groups

Giving away garden products



As STIGA approaches its 90th anniversary, the manufacturer has announced the launch of a new campaign called ‘We Care, That You Care.’

The company says its goal is to support 90 community garden groups throughout the UK, honouring each year of their 90th anniversary by empowering others with their garden products.

In a statement, the manufacturer said: “STIGA believes that everyone deserves the chance to cultivate beautiful spaces responsibly, and during 2024 the team are giving away their eco-friendly garden products to community garden groups, up and down the UK, for free!”

They say the campaign is aimed at a diverse array of community groups, from schools and hospital gardens to urban gardens, food bank gardens, community gardens and guerrilla gardeners. They believe each one of these groups

represents a unique opportunity for them to engage, help and empower local communities.

Communities and individuals associated with the community group can contact STIGA through a dedicated web page, where information about their project will be collected and products selected that will benefit their project. This process, says the company, ensures every aspiring group has an equal opportunity to be chosen.

STIGA are now asking anyone responsible for any nonprofit, community group or charity that looks after a green space – and who would like to receive products from their garden product range for free – to register on the wecare.stigauk.com website.

The company’s judging panel will assess applications and will notify successful parties, stating the free products that will be donated to their community group.

DEALERS

New Holland award their dealers

At Dealer Kick-Off meeting

New Holland has announced the winners of its 2023 UK and ROI Dealer of The Year Awards, which celebrate excellence in performance and service quality across its UK and Ireland dealer network.

The UK awards were announced at the Dealer Kick-Off Meeting, which was held at the Basildon plant, followed by an evening dinner at Stock Brook Manor Golf and Country Club. The awards were presented by Sean Lennon, vice president of New Holland Europe, and David Rapkins, New Holland business director for the UK and ROI. The Republic of Ireland awards meeting and dinner was held at the Moyvalley Hotel and Golf Resort in County Kildare, where David Rapkins presented the awards.

David Rapkins said: "I would like to express my congratulations to all the

2023 New Holland Dealer of the Year winners. These awards acknowledge and reward the performance and effort that our dealers put into the service they provide to our customers. A big thank you to all our UK and ROI dealers, who have contributed to make 2023 a great year. We truly appreciate your hard work and excellent teamwork across the dealer network."



David Rapkins

Main category winners:

- Overall, UK Dealer of the Year: **Russell's Ltd**
- Ireland Dealer of the Year: **M & S Machinery**
- Medium UK Dealer of the Year: **Francis Bugler Ltd**
- Small UK Dealer of the Year: **T Alun Jones & Son**

Product Line Category Winners:

- Combine Dealer of the Year: **Robert D Webster Ltd**
- Tractor Dealer of the Year: **Lloyd Ltd**
- Hay and Forage Dealer of the Year: **Lloyd Ltd**
- PLM Dealer of the Year: **Agricar Ltd**
- Implements Dealer of the Year: **Agricar Ltd**
- Construction Equipment Dealer of the Year: **M & S Machinery**
- Telehandler Dealer of the Year: **Ernest Doe & Sons Ltd**
- Parts Dealer of the Year: **T H White Ltd**
- NPS Dealer of the Year: **Ernest Doe & Sons Ltd**



DEALERS

Toro UK hosts Russell's team

For sales and product training



The sales team at Toro UK Limited recently hosted Russell's Groundcare Ltd at their head office in Spellbrook, Hertfordshire.

The two-day sales and product training focused on predominantly the Landscape Contractor and Site Works portfolios. Despite the inclement weather conditions, the team managed to view a number of products.

Matthew Coleman, sales manager, Professional Landscape Contractor & Site Works Equipment - UK Direct Market, said: "I am proud to be able to host this training for our long-established dealer, Russell's Groundcare. The training made for a great opportunity to focus Russell's pro sales team on the extensive Toro portfolio."

"The visit covered the benefits and features of Toro products for the commercial customer, a tour of our Spellbrook factory, an insight into future developments, and the chance for Toro UK and Russell's to spend invaluable time together as a team."

DEALERS



Ripon announce new CEO

Geoff Brown transitions to chairman

Ripon Farm Services (RFS) has announced the appointment of Richard Simpson as its new CEO, with Geoff Brown MBE becoming chairman.

Three years ago, RFS say they made the decision to strengthen the board to ensure they had a structure in place to manage the future growth and succession of the company, with the appointment of Richard Simpson as commercial director.

Richard comes from a farming background, and has extensive experience in transforming companies large and small. RFS say he brings a wealth of knowledge and a fresh perspective to their business. In his new role as CEO, Richard will have full responsibility for the strategic development and the day-to-day running of the business.

Geoff Brown will continue to be ever present in the company, and advise on strategic direction. He will also be able to dedicate more time and energy to his upcoming charitable endeavours in his role as president of the Yorkshire Agricultural Society – and, at the same time, ensure a smooth leadership transition within the company.

Geoff said: "I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all employees, customers and the folks at John Deere who have been instrumental in our journey over the past 40 years. The

unwavering commitment, hard work and passion have been invaluable in shaping the company into what it is today. That said, we must keep moving forwards. There is a lot to do, and we must continue to improve, embrace innovation, and always strive to surpass customer expectations."

Joedy Ibbotson, division sales manager at John Deere UK, commented: "Everyone at John Deere would like to sincerely thank Geoff for his continued and unwavering loyalty to the John Deere brand, and all that he has achieved through his leadership of Ripon Farm Services."

"All of us at John Deere are incredibly grateful for all that Geoff has done to support and grow the John Deere brand. We look forward to continuing our long-standing partnership with Ripon Farm Services, as Geoff transitions into his new role and Richard takes over as CEO."

Richard Simpson added: "This is an incredible honour, and one which I am terrified about, to be honest. Ripon Farm Services is a truly great business, and following Geoff to lead the company is the most challenging thing I have ever done. What an incredible legacy he has built. We must all work together to ensure that the values on which the company is built are preserved and enhanced in the years to come."



L-R: Mick Reeves (RVT, sales), John Preston (branch manager), Phil Everett (MD, Boss ORV), Matt Mulligan (MD, RVT) and Dave Arnold (RVT, sales)

DEALERS

Yamaha add to network

For their utility range

Whatever Wheels, situated in Blackburn, have recently taken on Yamaha's utility ATV range in the North West.

The business was initially founded in 2009, specialising in motorcycle sales. The company progressed into ATV sales in 2014, and sold a variation of ATVs before committing to Yamaha solely in 2019. The partnership began with the sports range of bikes, and then, in 2020, Whatever Wheels began selling Yamaha's Leisure range. The Utility range has now completed its offering.

Luke Davis, business manager at Whatever Wheels, said: "The area which we are in lends itself well to the Utility range. We are located in Blackburn, but we are surrounded by a very large rural community in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cumbria, and then we deal with Greater Manchester area, too. We have a mixture of customers at the moment, and the farming community is an area we would like to grow the business. Yamaha is the perfect partner for us to do this with, as it has a specific product for these purposes."

Chris Embleton, area sales manager at Yamaha ATV UK, added: "Whatever Wheels has grown from strength to strength since the partnership with Yamaha first began in 2019. We are looking forward to seeing the opportunities that the addition of the Utility range will give the business with our full support."



Luke Davis

Rea Valley expand offering

With utility vehicle line-up

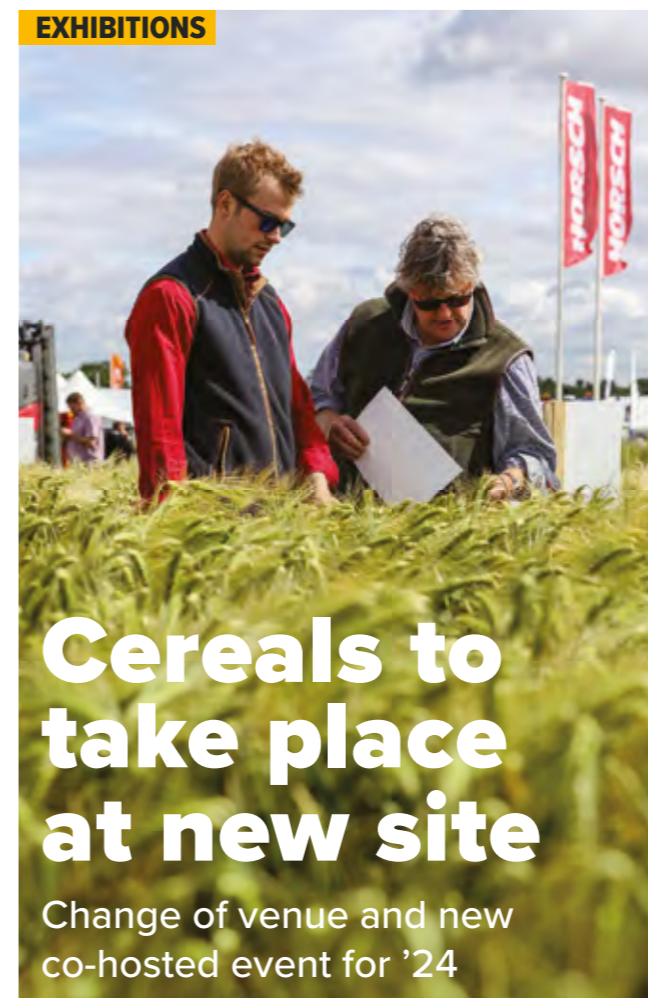
Rea Valley Tractors now offer Corvus Off-Road Vehicles at its Sudbury depot, serving Derbyshire and Staffordshire, as announced by Phil Everett, MD of Boss ORV, the distributor of Corvus in the UK.

Phil expressed the company's longstanding efforts to expand Corvus's presence in these regions, underscoring the importance of selecting the right partner.

"We have been looking for some time to develop further coverage for Corvus in these regions," said Phil. "Finding the right partner is, as always, a carefully-considered process, and we're pleased to be collaborating with the Rea Valley Tractors to broaden Corvus' reach and enhance its accessibility to its product range."

Rea Valley Tractors' managing director, Matt Mulligan, said: "We're celebrating our 40th year in 2024 and, as a trusted name in the agricultural community, we've forged meaningful and long-lasting relationships with both customers and manufacturers alike. We're delighted to extend this tradition by encompassing Corvus Off-Road Vehicles sales and support throughout the regions."

EXHIBITIONS



Organisers of the 2024 Cereals Event have announced they will welcome visitors to a new site at Bygrave Woods, Newnham Farm in Hertfordshire, on 11-12 June, alongside its brand-new co-hosted event DirectDriller@Cereals.

Hosted by Alex Farr and his cousin, Edward Wainright Lee, both events will be held on the Farr family's 45-hectare outdoor event space - one of the 900-hectare arable farm's diversifications, complete with established trackways and amenities. Cereals say its 10 years as a large event venue means it is well-placed to host the 20,000-plus visitors the events are set to attract.

"We love welcoming people to Bygrave Woods - it's great to be the host farm for Cereals after attending it over the years," said Alex Farr. "The event offers such breadth of information and technology. The progress in robotic technology is always something that gets our attention - and it never gets old meeting new and old friends."

As ever, Cereals will showcase the latest developments in arable agronomy, machinery, technology and business advice, with over 450 exhibitors, 200-plus live demonstrations, two days of seminar programmes, and several hundred individual crop plots on display.

New to 2024 is a co-located event, DirectDriller@Cereals. Co-hosted by Cereals and Direct Driller Magazine, its theme is 'Regenerating farm profit', and it will focus on how regenerative agriculture can make large-scale arable farms more commercially successful. It will comprise a full conference programme, including seminars curated by BASE UK and a schedule of demonstrations.

PEOPLE

Baroness expand into Scotland

Manufacturer's first ASM appointment in country

Baroness UK have announced the appointment of a new area sales and service manager for Scotland.

With more than 18 years of industry experience under his belt, Richard Connell says he is well-placed to provide sales and technical support to customers and the dealer network across Scotland - proudly becoming the first dedicated Baroness UK representative for the region.

After obtaining qualifications in land-based engineering, Richard worked for a number of manufacturers and turf care dealers - in both workshop and mobile service engineer roles. Most recently, he brought together his technical understanding and passion for the

game of golf in the position of head mechanic and workshop manager at North Berwick Golf Club.

The manufacturer says that, in joining Baroness UK, Connell brings both hands-on experience and a technical mind to the table as he oversees the sales, service and workshop operations of the established dealer network within his area. Richard said: "Before coming onboard, I had started to see the Baroness brand more and more here in Scotland, and my inner mechanic immediately took an interest in the machinery. I loved their approach, and what their portfolio of machines offered to the market."

"It is a huge honour and privilege to be entrusted as the first Baroness

representative in Scotland, and, after solidifying a number of relationships with those I saw at BTME in January, I look forward to exploring new opportunities and driving business forwards in the months and years ahead."



Richard Connell

INDUSTRY

Half-century celebrated

IFGM thrilled to reach milestone

Irish Farm & Garden Machinery (IFGM) is celebrating 50 years of business this year.

The independent distributors of outdoor power equipment remain family-owned and run, now managed by second-generation Paul Butterly (managing director) and brother Kieran (technical director). Although retired, mum (and co-founder) Eileen continues to pop into the Dublin office around three days a week - just to ensure that the business continues to operate smoothly.

"We're thrilled to have reached this milestone," said Paul. "This is a tough industry, and the fact that we're here in 2024, bigger and stronger than ever, is simply amazing."

Paul continued: "We've always

focused on keeping the company very nimble, and this gives us a lot of flexibility to adapt to changing market conditions. We've been careful in the rate of our expansion, gradually building the business over time, only working with the very best brands in the industry. No matter what is happening in the economy, people will always buy quality product that offers the best value for money."

In 2006, the business purchased UK distributor Claymore Grass Machinery, now known as FGM Claymore, an acquisition that greatly extended the reach of the company. In 2022, the business was awarded UK distribution rights for Echo, which – following the appointment in Ireland a few years earlier – made IFGM the

third-largest Echo distributor in Europe.

The team at IFGM celebrated the anniversary at a special event recently held in Athlone. Dealers from all over the country, alongside special guests from Briggs & Stratton and Yamabiko, joined the Butterly family to celebrate the anniversary.

Paul gave a special presentation that covered the history of the company, sharing anecdotes alongside the major milestones that made up the IFGM story. There were congratulatory video messages from garden machinery suppliers in New Zealand, Japan, and Italy, alongside special in-person presentations from Briggs & Stratton and Yamabiko.



L-R: Paul, Eileen and Kieran Butterly



COBRA

Why Not Become a Cobra Dealer in 2024?

With over 170 products in the Cobra range including the new Fortis lawnmowers powered by EGO Peak Power 56v Technology and the powerful V-Twin lawn tractor range, Cobra is fast becoming a market leading brand in garden machinery. Contact us to join the growing number of Cobra Dealers across the U.K. For information on becoming a Cobra Dealer contact Andy Marvin: 07771 581 296 or call: 0115 986 6646.

- Increase your business and bottom line profits.
- Exclusive special offers on selected products.
- Extensive local & national Cobra marketing support.
- An evolving range of over 170 gardening products.
- No unreasonable Cobra stocking commitment.



Cordless Mowers



Petrol Mowers



Ride-Ons



Cylinder Mowers



Chippers



News in brief:

Read these stories and more at www.servicedealer.co.uk

PEOPLE



Dealer manager takes up role at Kubota

Ian Lauder has been appointed as Kubota (UK)'s agricultural and grounds care dealer manager for Scotland and the north of England.

INDUSTRY



STIHL announce charitable partnership

STIHL GB have announced they are partnering with Perennial, the UK's only charity dedicated to helping people in horticulture.

DEALERS



Perfect fit' for a dealership career

Andy Irvine is one of a number of individuals who have started new jobs at John Deere dealerships across the UK and Ireland following many years in service.

No mow media

A recent visit to a trade show targeted specifically at the gardening media led *Service Dealer* editor STEVE GIBBS to muse upon how often the specialist machinery that dealers sell in their showrooms is featured in the consumer-facing press.



The Garden Press Event took place in Islington's Business Design Centre

Think about when you've read about gardening in your newspaper, Sunday supplement or news stand magazine. Or when you watched any of the proliferation of gardening or garden makeover shows on TV. Or engaged with your favourite gardening influencer online.

How often in your consumption of those media were any of the brands of mowers you stock in your dealership featured? Or any of the other varieties of specialist machinery you sell? A handful of times? As many as that, even?



The event attracts journalists from the consumer-facing press

Odd, isn't it? Especially when you consider just how hugely popular a pastime gardening is with the British public - with lawncare, in particular, being integral to that. The old cliché of Brits being obsessed with their lawns clearly stems from a degree of truth. So why, then, is there this distinct lack of mainstream media coverage for the wide variety of equipment that our dealer readers specialise in?

I don't have an answer, by the way. The question was just at the forefront of my mind this Spring, when I attended a trade show in London, aimed specifically at journalists in the gardening sector.

Called the Garden Press Event, it is an exhibition exclusively open to writers, bloggers and content creators who cover the horticultural sphere. I have been attending it now for around 10 years or so, and have unfortunately seen the number of machinery manufactures and suppliers who chose to exhibit plummet.

I'm pretty sure that, in the immediate pre-Covid years, it reached around 15 or so brands who were looking to spread the word about their kit to the consumer-facing press. This year, there were five.

So what is the reason for this exodus? I do believe that, as a concept, the Garden Press Event is perfectly sound. In theory, new machinery - including the likes of exciting robotic technology with RTK control, and advancements in battery design - are displayed in front of journalists who will cover them in media consumed by your customers, who will then turn up at their local specialist retailer to learn more. Simple - except this can't be happening to the degree that many would desire.

I asked several manufacturers who had previously taken space at the show: what wasn't working about it for them, prompting their company not to return? One told me: *"The Garden Press Event is a nice show, but, sadly, we're always disappointed by the level of engagement with the press/media to be honest. . . To be frank, it was largely a waste of time."* Another said: *"I like the event, but I think the press are more interested in pretty things at this show rather than machinery."*

Another summed up their feelings about the show - and the wider question of lack of press interest - by saying: *"I would welcome the opportunity to chat to more press outside of our industry, as the majority of machines you often see in lists of best machines by mainstream publications, are not brands that dealers sell, and rarely will be of benefit to them."*

All of which are answers that are genuinely disappointing to hear.

"I like the event, but I think the press are more interested in pretty things at this show rather than machinery."

Facing the press

However, some of your machinery suppliers have chosen to stick with the show, so I was interested to hear what benefits they felt they got out of it.

Stihl told me they always meet the right people there. They said they pretty much know all the gardening press, anyway, but they always come away with some new quality contacts from the online gardening influencer spaces. Following this up with demos and reviews with these guys is great for their brand, they said, with the aim of building awareness and ultimately driving customers into dealerships. The event is as good as what you make it, they told me.

On their stand were a bunch of new tools, but particular interest was seen in the new KMA 120 R battery KombiEngine, which has been added to their AP System. The unit offers compatibility with all the main attachments, ranging from blowers and hedge trimmers to pole pruners and sweepers. Stihl said it boasts two speed settings and a variable speed trigger. It also features an Eco mode that reduces the motor RPM, maximising working time.



Husqvarna said they do find they receive decent coverage in consumer-targeted media following the Garden Press Event. They specifically cited a tie-up they had made with *Gardener's World* last year, which many dealers had told them had brought new customers into their showrooms.

They told me that, when they are working with influencers, they aim to get local dealers involved too, where they can. The aim always being to increase footfall in dealerships.

The manufacturer was emphasising their Aspire range at the show. They featured the robotic mower, and were telling the press that, with the Automower Connect users can easily set mowing schedules and

cutting height. Also on show was the hedge trimmer, whose leaf catcher, they said, makes clean-up easier - and battery status is tracked directly on the handle. The pruner, meanwhile, is designed as a two-in-one tool, with an extendable pole attachment for ladder-free pruning and pole-sawing.



The Aspire range featured on Husqvarna's stand, alongside Flymo and Gardena

Stiga said they believed that, to make this event successful, it was vital to have new products and innovations to talk about with the press. They look to offer quality content for journalists to pick up on - and were mindful that the journalists they were speaking to were not necessarily machinery experts. It was therefore important to cover the basics, but to emphasise the exciting technological developments they are driving.



Stiga's Simon Hill demonstrated the new SC 100e pruner



Amongst new products from Makita is the DUC150 pruning saw



Barrus showed off the new Segway Series I robot

To this end, as well as highlighting the developments seen in their robotic mower ranges, Stiga were also showing off their first-ever battery-powered pruner, the SC 100e. The company said that, with an option to select from three blade opening settings, the pruner can cut and trim branches up to 3cm in diameter. They boasted that its high-quality carbon steel blades are extremely sharp, and capable of making a clean and precise cut.

Makita had a slightly different outlook. Whilst they featured plenty of new products on their stand, they said attending the show was at least in part an exercise in showing support for the organisers, the HTA, of which they are a member.

One new featured tool on their stand – which, the company said, was joining the outdoor lineup – was the DUC150 18V 150mm pruning saw. Operating with a chain speed of 8m/s, they said the machine offered excellent cutting performance despite its lightweight design, making it suitable for general garden applications or orchard maintenance.

They went on to say additional comfort and efficiency enhancing features included toolless chain tensioning and automatic chain oiling, while a brushless motor ensured low maintenance requirements and a longer working motor life.

Barrus, finally, said that, because they represent multiple brands that are producing so many new items – spanning a gardening spectrum as diverse as welly boots to ride-on mowers – it was a great opportunity for them to meet press from all different horticultural segments.

One of the brands they were giving particular focus to on their stand were the Segway robotic mowers – showing off the new I Series.

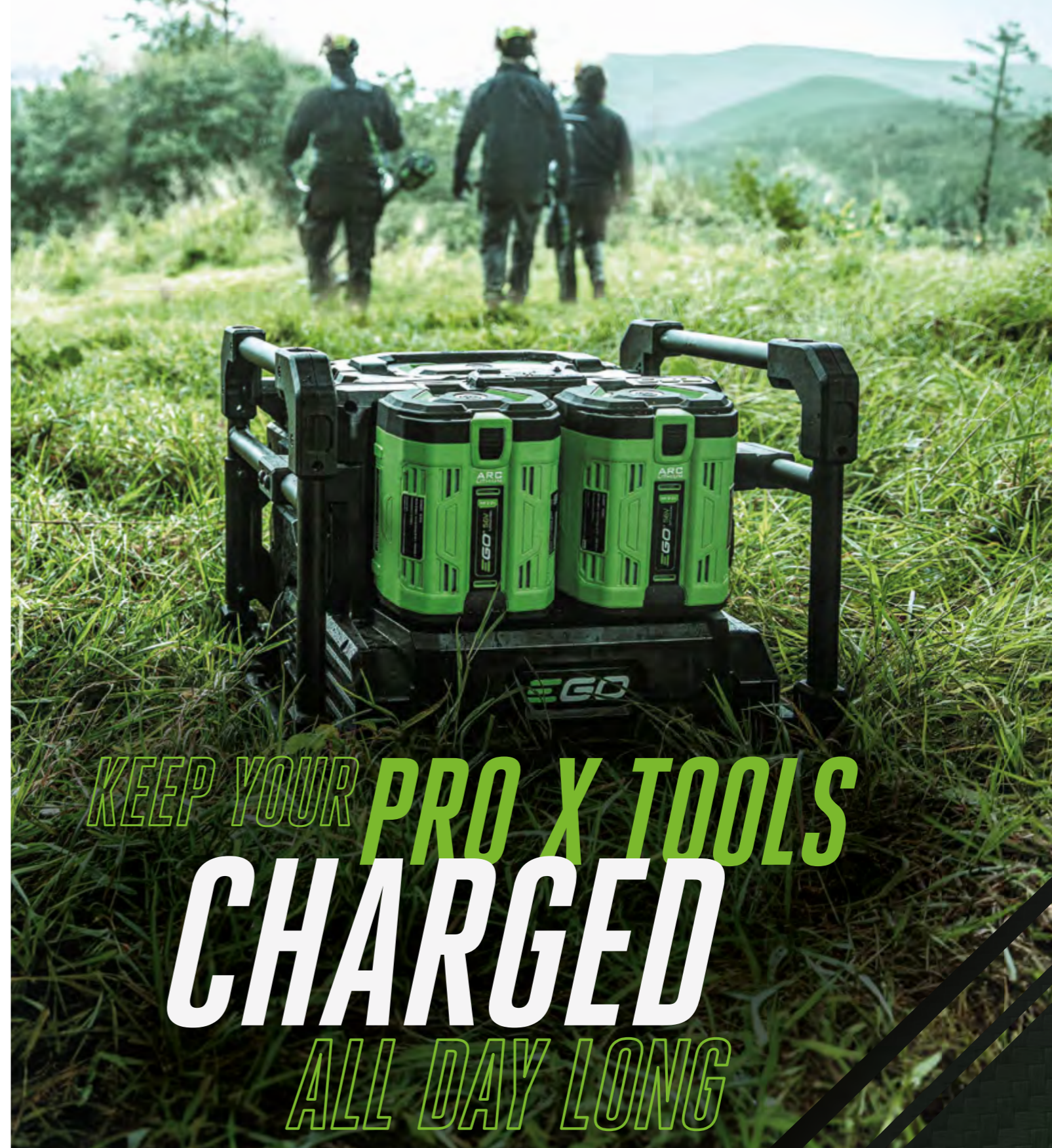
They said everything with the new robots can be set up virtually via the Navimow app, with users able to mark virtual boundaries, identify off-limits islands and draw safe channels to connect multiple zones in just a few taps. Barrus said Segway has developed its own vision-RTK positioning system, combining a customised RTK chip with a vision system enabled by a 140°POV camera. As a result, the new range can handle a diverse spectrum of lawn layouts while providing centimetre-level positioning, navigating gardens stably and systematically and intelligently avoiding objects. They also utilise AI technology to optimise mapping accuracy.

I do hope that these five sole machinery exhibitors received some positive coverage from exhibiting at the Garden Press Event this year. If they did, one likes to hope that translates into fresh faces entering your dealerships in search of something they've read about or seen.

Clearly, increased reviews, demos and case studies on specialist kit would be beneficial to all across the industry. Perhaps, though, traditional media will never be especially interested in lawnmowers and the like. Maybe it will be this emerging trend of niche bloggers and vloggers who will shine a light on the exciting tech that's available to aid gardeners. Our friend James Hayes and his *Machinery Nation* channel, for example, are doing this.

James told us: "There does seem to have always been a lack of interest from the mainstream media, but certainly even less in later years. It's amazing how niche our industry is perceived, when yet it is so vast, with a huge following."

Indeed, this lack of coverage remains truly puzzling.



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David Hedges-Gower, founder of the Lawn Association

The lawn industry is fragmented

So says the founder of the Lawn Association, David Hedges-Gower. He spoke to *Service Dealer* editor STEVE GIBBS about what the Association is looking to achieve – and how the dealer network can play an important role that will be directly beneficial to their businesses.

It may be an element integral to the continued success of specialist dealerships, but, as an industry, it is arguable that there is a key factor we don't talk about enough: the lawn itself.

If homeowners and commercial spaces across the country were not concerned – obsessed, even – with the maintenance of these valuable green spaces, where would the industry be?

There is an organisation, however, that is dedicated to championing all aspects of the lawn. Headed by the (appropriately-named) David Hedges-Gower, the Lawn Association describe themselves as an educational platform, teaching correct, modern, sustainable lawncare techniques. Recent campaigns they have put their weight behind include improving the quality of lawns in new build homes and an appeal for a nationwide ban on all pesticides used in lawn maintenance.

I spoke to David recently to find out what the association stood for – and, crucially, how they felt that specialist outdoor powered machinery dealers could play an important role in helping them achieve their goals which would not only contribute to

the ongoing betterment of lawns - but would be financially beneficial to their own businesses.

Service Dealer: What exactly is the Lawn Association?

David Hedges-Gower: The association is an educational body, aimed at offering factual lawn care advice. Especially important in this day of opinion-based apparent expertise. We currently run two online learning courses: one for homeowners and one for the more advanced professional, be that gardener, landscaper, lawn company, garden designers, etcetera.

SD: What is your role in the Association?

DHG: I founded this Association back in 2020, and I am now the lead consultant and educator.

SD: And what is your background?

DHG: My background stems from 44 years of turf experience. 25 years in golf, ending as superintendent at the Oxfordshire Golf Club, where I oversaw tournaments, such as the Benson and Hedges International Open, world championships of golf and Ladies English Opens.

SD: What would you cite as some notable achievements of the Association?

DHG: Lawncare has been run by the media and individual companies, such as Evergreen, Westland, or sports amenity suppliers. The press do play a big part in how lawns are perceived, how homeowners are led in the way to look after them, which all has a knock-on effect within lawncare. We have been on Gardener's World podcasts, as well as many platforms to improve homeowners' knowledge. Our training courses have been taken by English Heritage and the National Trust, as well as many others. Our mantra is on sustainable lawncare for the future, as with changing environments this will change the way we look after them.

SD: What would you say are some of the current concerns, or ongoing aims, of the Association?

DHG: The biggest concern is not just lack of education, but how many give bad and poor advice. A billion pages on Google are misleading, and often lead to poorer-quality lawns. Sports turf has made its way into lawns, and this is a failed lawn grass template which

ensures yearly failures, lawns thinning and being replaced by plastic - eight million square metres last year, in fact, the size of London!

SD: So what, in your view, could our readership of independent outdoor powered machinery dealers be doing in their roles to help your cause?

DHG: The lawn industry is fragmented. It needs more networking and collaborating, so the goals of us all are easier, simpler, and better for homeowners and the environment. We can aid dealers' customers with better learning experiences on how to improve their lawns, as well as the right equipment and dealers to supply them. We have the world's most comprehensive mowing guide as one example, which all dealers can have for free, but also could be added as a tie-on to every lawnmower. We also have blogs, newsletters, and tons of correct information on how to maintain lawns.

SD: The notion of a garden machinery dealer almost being a total 'lawncare centre' selling seed, fertilisers, etcetera, alongside machinery, has been mooted by some in the past. What is your opinion on that?

DHG: My own opinion is: 'Absolutely, if it comes with correct information. Many

companies use misleading information on selling products, which many fall for. But being a one-stop shop isn't done enough, in my opinion. But, just like selling mowers, backup and the right knowledge is key.

SD: In your opinion, is there anything you've seen dealers doing that you think could be improved?

DHG: I think the lack of networking has always surprised me. Networking with each other is fine, but there is a huge area of lawn care out there. Most homeowners probably don't know their local dealer. The opportunities are endless to promote lawns and machinery, such as open days, talks, demos, etcetera. I've discussed with manufacturers to an extent, but it's really the dealers that need this.

SD: On the flipside, have you ever come across dealer practice that has particularly impressed?

DHG: Of course, dealerships and showrooms can see some great displays, but the footfall could be increased, especially when sustainability is brought into the equation. People want change, they want healthy grass and lawns, and they want to know how to do it. What impresses me is the ability to break the mould, do something that will bring

change, get out of your comfort zone, make yourself get talked about. It's good for business.

SD: Are there trends you've seen in garden machinery that you feel are especially beneficial to the future of lawncare?

DHG: Of course. Batteries and robots are impressive in different ways. Robots and the correct native grasses are the easiest way to a healthy, beautiful lawn with minimal effort. These mowers really will take over lawncare on many levels.

SD: What do you feel is the relationship between lawncare and the wider, mainstream media? Is it overlooked in favour of other aspects of gardening?

DHG: One million percent! This is where we have come in, as we are bridging that gap. We have been extensively promoting lawncare in a more sustainable light. That's exactly what we do. This is leading to a change in concept in the media that nice lawns must be a barren oasis of chemicals, fossil fuels and all the things that give lawns a bad name. It's also important as to why networking and coming together as a better community is more important. I was behind the Channel 5 documentary on lawns. It was Channel





5 that heard me on radio and asked me to be involved. It was due to be an educational piece on modern, sustainable lawncare, and before it was edited, the producer left and I had to remove all my filming rights. So in the end, it was about two lawn obsessives. But, still, lawns were on TV for the first time ever!

SD: Is there anything you'd like to see happen on a legislative or governmental level to aid lawncare?

DHG: We are now talking to many bodies, and lawncare will get a top seat at the – parliamentary – table soon. Plastic carpet must get outlawed or heavily restricted. I know after my time in grass care that the correct grass species – those that cover most of the UK – make lawns easy, and, since the 1990s, we have been guided by so many misleading bits of information designed to make lawns fail. There is no such thing as a moss or weedkiller

for lawns. There are grasses designed to fail, which need constant reseeding and self-monetising for many. Great for pockets, but not the environment. So, yes, getting to talk to law-changers is one aspect. We network with the garden designers, landscapers, gardeners and lawn companies in a way to better educate without relying on quick legislative change.

SD: What do you foresee as the future for lawncare and garden machinery in the UK?

DHG: I don't think it will change much from what it is, but it must change. It must draw people to want to understand. Why are robots better? Many will ask: what is a robot? Can I feed healthily? Can I eradicate the need for chemicals? What scarifier is best? Dealers need support, and need something to help promote lawns. It's a big movement to change.

SD: Is there anything else you'd like to convey to our readership of outdoor powered machinery dealers?

DHG: Many won't have heard of me – many won't care, perhaps – but lawns have to stay relative to our changing world. Lawns still have a bad reputation to many, but my work behind the scenes gets it talked about much more in a positive way. We must make lawns seem sustainable, and we're not helping with some current trends. We deal with bodies such as Kew, the RHS and others, so we are educating and communicating with a better audience and getting them back inside. Lawns are here to stay, but we must promote each other as well as best practice. We all share a passion, and the same desires to make gardening better. It's not the start of our journey, but we would love to continue with a bigger network.

SD: Thank you.

Dealers can find out more and download a mowing guide at: www.lawnassociation.org.uk



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Open house attracts the crowds

Challenging times in the ag machinery sector were matched by challenging conditions for the setup staff, as high winds faced the Farmstar marquee pitching team ahead of the Yorks, Notts and Lincs dealers' open day. MARTIN RICKATSON found out how the business is faring otherwise.

Maintaining a stable turnover despite rising interest charges and industry volatility marked a good past year's performance for the team at Yorks-based farm and turf equipment dealer Farmstar.

That's how the business's general manager, Sam Davies, summed up the mood within the firm as it prepared to hold its annual open day back in late January, and, with a decent crowd through the doors, he remains cautiously optimistic that the company is in a good position to handle the choppy waters that may be ahead for the remainder of 2024.

Incorporated in 1988, Farmstar was founded initially as an agricultural machinery hire and lease business, but, two years later, it signed an agreement for a franchise with Case IH, becoming a dealer for the red-and-black marque's tractor and combine ranges, supporting the brand by establishing a full sales, service and parts team.

Under managing director Andrew Waddington, it has since expanded its activities to encompass three depots across Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, which all hold the Case IH franchise – the headquarters branch at Marr, near Doncaster, and depots at Market Weighton (serving North and East Yorkshire) and Brigg (covering the north Lincs area). In addition, the company has a further dedicated branch at Newark, Notts, for Kubota agricultural tractor and farm equipment business in south Notts and north Lincs, while the Marr and Brigg depots also offer Kubota tractors up to 110hp, as well as the Japanese firm's full groundcare range.

"The head office depot is located close to the A1, giving us and our customers good access to and from the local area, from North Yorkshire down to north Nottinghamshire," says Sam.

"I think the fact we've been established here at Marr for over 30 years, and sold the same brand of tractors and combines from here for all that time, has helped us to develop customer loyalty and confidence in our commitment to supporting farmers across our territory. There has been a lot of change in the dealer network across all major brands during that period, so being able to provide customers with this sort of stability has worked strongly in our favour.

"This is a strong area for large arable farms, so having a good line of high-output tracked and wheeled tractors and rotary combines from our major supplier has helped us to develop and sustain a sound customer base.

"Across the four depots, today we employ a staff of 80, and, beyond Case IH and Kubota, we also hold franchises for Kverneland – which is owned by Kubota – plus Manitou, Richard Western, Phillip Watkins and Bomford Turner."

While the past couple of years produced some healthy sales volumes in terms of tractors and other key items of farm equipment, farmer belt-tightening is now being felt across the dealer sector, notes Sam.

"On the back of strong tractor sales, we enjoyed a record turnover in 2022, but things have contracted a bit since then, thanks to inflation, higher interest rates and input costs, and a fall in grain prices.

"It would appear that we are dropping back to a new normal level in terms of tractor sales post-Covid,

and the supply issues caused by component-sourcing problems.

"Machinery sales, however, still seem to be thriving, which is always good for the broader health of the business. We are fortunate to have behind us a very a strong brand in Kverneland, which enables us to meet many of the needs and requirements of farmers and contractors in both the arable and livestock sectors, from ploughs, tillage equipment, drills, sprayers and spreaders to forage and straw equipment."

Changing customer base

The Farmstar business has gone through a great deal of change over the last few years in order to remain in keeping with the changing demographic of its customer base, says Sam.

"We have seen farmers across our area enter into a lot of diversification of their businesses, and this has had a bearing on the requirements they have developed that they need us to meet.

"The number of solar panel installations across farmland is just one example, and in that case has resulted in a growth in demand for small tractors, mowers and other machinery to enable the land around the panels to be easily maintained."

Beyond physical equipment, in a trend that is likely reflected in many of today's agricultural and groundcare machinery dealerships, Farmstar is also experiencing growth in retail and support of connected services.

"Case IH offers its AFS Connect technology on its larger tractors and combines, and the ability this offers to be able to automatically record field and machine operating data is something farmers are attracted by. They can see remotely, via an app or the farm PC, how much of a field has been worked at any given time, for example, or what fuel remains in a tractor's tank, allowing them to take supplies out to the field if required.

"Dates, times, tasks and much more can all be instantly and securely recorded in the cloud on a customer's account, and they can also use the technology to provide alerts if a machine leaves a defined area, helping ensure the security of machines.

"But they are also increasingly recognising the benefits of extending what connected services can do, by permitting their dealer to monitor the health of their machines. Field and fleet planning, workloads and analysis can be planned and carried out via the portal, and data can be easily shared from the office PC not only with the operators in the field, but also, if the owner chooses, with the dealership. That allows us to issue advance warning of any potential issues, provide remote support on machine settings, troubleshoot any issues and minimise downtime by remotely viewing the screen display in the tractor cab and assisting the operator. We can also remotely update software."

With the larger Case IH tractors and combines being fitted today as



General manager Sam Davies (second right) with key members of the Farmstar team, including md Andrew Waddington (centre)



Visitors were able to view a full lineup of Case IH tractors, topped by the new Quadtrac 715



In addition to Case IH, Farmstar's primary farm equipment franchises include Kubota and Kverneland



Farmstar management plans to move its exhibition focus from commercial shows to more customer-focused events

standard with the technology that makes all this possible, buyers are increasingly choosing to take up the subscription that activates it in order to automate their record-keeping, says Sam – and a number have chosen to also opt to allow Farmstar to monitor their machines.

“Among our team, we have a dedicated specialist trained by Case IH in the AFS Connect technology, so we can ensure that both we and the customer get the maximum out of the data management benefits this brings,” says Sam.

“This gives us the ability to quickly interpret real-time operating data to ensure machines are properly managed, take a proactive approach to maintenance, and help customers evaluate their field data.”

Drawing the crowds

Case IH’s new flagship tractor, the AFS Connect-equipped Quadtrac 715, was a major crowd-puller for visitors to Farmstar’s open day, but there were plenty of more modest tractors and other equipment on show for the vast majority of visitors, requiring something a bit more standard-sized.

“We reckon to have had over 700 visitors across the day, with people arriving when we opened the event at 10am and plenty still here when we officially ended at 4pm. Our suppliers provided a really impressive level of support, with technical specialists on hand to help our sales team with particular queries.

“We had a lot of Kverneland equipment, in particular, on display, on both the arable and livestock sides and of various sizes. We have been one of Kverneland’s leading UK dealers for many years, retailing Kverneland implements through our Case IH outlets and both Kverneland and Kubota-branded ones via our Kubota-only depot at Newark.

“An event like this also gives us a good opportunity to encourage visitors to take up service and warranty deals, and special offers on items in our stores.”

In terms of encouraging visitors to consider or even seal the deal on a new machine, throwing open the doors each year and putting equipment in front of potential buyers this way – with dealer staff supported by manufacturer and importer representatives – helps oil the wheels. This year looks set to be somewhat tougher in terms of getting customers to commit to making purchases after the event, though.

“With manufacturers encouraging dealers to take in higher levels of stock, but prices having risen significantly in recent months, and interest rates remaining high, it’s looking like a challenging year. And, with farms becoming larger in size and fewer in number, we have fewer prospects to aim at. But we have a good product range in all sectors and a really keen sales team, plus a lot of loyalty from our existing customer base. We have also seen more conquest sales, as the market

has become increasingly competitive, with farmers looking beyond purchase cost and increasingly examining lifetime cost of ownership when making decisions between machine alternatives. If a particular machine costs more than another comparable one, they need to know they are going to get that back in increased performance and efficiency.

“In the same way, we need staff who are going to make us the most efficient business we can be. As we have grown, we have focused on recruiting high-calibre staff, and we have developed an excellent team, from people who have always been in the agricultural industry to ex-forces staff who have joined us on the service side, and sales staff who have brought in experience in other areas, too. There is probably a lot the farm machinery dealer sector could learn from the way targets and prospects are handled and nurtured in other sectors. As the number of potential buyers gets smaller in farming, it’s necessary to be more proactive in our approach to attracting and securing them.

“By investing significantly in technology over recent years, and equipping everybody with what they need to work efficiently both remotely and in the office, we have developed a more flexible sales staff management system, ensuring staff make as much use as possible of technology to work from home when coming into the office isn’t perhaps necessary, and to get straight out onto farm as much as possible. Regular presence in the office is still important, though – team communication and the exchange of ideas can help solve challenges, and it maintains good company morale, as well as keeping staff updated first-hand on what’s happening in the company.

“The success of this year’s open day reinforced our plan to move our exhibition focus from commercial shows to more customer-focused events. There is a lot of value in bringing together our team and key staff from our suppliers in front of potential customers, and, while I am sure there may be some challenges ahead this year, I think we are well-equipped to face them.”



The Farmstar team was supported on the day by technical specialists from key suppliers to provide potential customers with advice



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Rhys Adams
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Andrew Wood
Business Development Manager, Honey Brothers

Professionals get to grips with Makita's expanded range

Service Dealer contributor LAURENCE GALE Msc, MBPR – editor of our sister title *TurfPro* – recently attended a demonstration event, where the manufacturer allowed professional end-users to get hands-on with their ever-expanding range of cordless tools.

Turf professionals have a fantastic range of working tools in their armoury these days, to tackle every task in the green spaces where they work.

This was highlighted to me on a recent trip to Wellesbourne, near Stratford-upon-Avon, where I had the opportunity to attend manufacturer

Makita's Outdoor Power Equipment Showcase at the Mercure Walton Hall Hotel. A stunning venue for demonstrating gardening equipment.



The demonstration event took place at the Mercure Walton Hall Hotel

I have been aware of the quality of Makita battery-powered tools for some time now. However, the company have expanded their output, building up a vast range. They now have over 20 different mowers to choose from, along with a plethora of other complimentary tools, including:

- Power cutters
- Power washer
- Wheelbarrows / power carriers
- Scarifier
- Hedge trimmers
- Blowers
- Mowers
- Linetrimmers and brush cutters
- Chainsaws
- Pruners

The day began with a welcome and introduction to the day's proceedings by Outdoor Power Equipment & Contracts manager Mark Earles, who was keen to emphasise the substantial growth in the company's available garden products.

Mark told me this was the third time the manufacturer had hosted a garden machinery product event in the UK for its dealer base. Mark said: "We were delighted to see increased attendance this year, and to unveil some exciting new products, including a number that aren't due to be launched until later in 2024. We believe that this type of event is important, as it gives customers the opportunity to get hands-on with our products and see for themselves how each product performs.

"It is easy to look at products in catalogues or online,

but being able to use the machines on the day enables customers to see for themselves the quality of our cordless range and how they really perform."

Mark said they received some great feedback during and following the event from users and dealers, especially from those who got hands-on, testing the range of products.

I asked Mark what the company do with the feedback they receive at events such as this. "Visitors do make suggestions on certain improvements for some machines," he explained. "However, the Makita Japan R&D team regularly visit different countries and markets each year, where they talk with dealers and end-users around the world to discuss potential new products and technologies. The intention is to implement this information for potential new products."

Cordless flexibility

The day was split into two morning sessions, followed by lunch, and then an afternoon session. There were twelve demo stations for attendees to learn about the vast range of products now available. Mark was also keen to announce several new products that will be released later in the year, some of which were prototypes that were on show at the event.

In attendance were around 90 practitioners, dealers, hire companies and members of the press. While petrol power has long been the go-to fuel for most outdoor landscaping jobs, many are now making the switch to battery power. With no power cables, petrol or generators to manage, operators can now enjoy total freedom and flexibility to work anywhere across the site.

The absence of a power cable also removes potential trip hazards and eliminates the risk of the cable snagging on something or coming into contact with the moving parts of the machine. And, as there is no need to handle and transport fuel, the dangers of spillage and fire – both in transit and on-site – are removed.

Advances in engineering technology, and the adoption of lithium (Li-ion) batteries, mean that today's cordless tools can achieve torque and speed outputs that are comparable to their corded and petrol counterparts.

I was particularly impressed with the sheer size and range of the equipment now on offer to both domestic and professional end-users.

I asked Mark how regularly the company are adding to their range. "We introduce new products every quarter across our power tools and cordless garden machinery ranges," he told me. "However, the number varies each quarter of each year. This year, we introduced around 110 models, if we include all variants, or around 70 if we just include base models."

Broad range on show

With over twenty types of mowers, there appeared to be something for everyone. I was also impressed with the full range of hedge trimmers they offer, along with a choice of chainsaws. All in all, they can compete with most OPE suppliers for choice.



A mix of around 90 practitioners, dealers, hire companies and members of the press attended the event



Twelve demo stations were available



End-users could get hands-on



The DUP180 was one of the new tools on show

I would say, for example, that their small hand tool range is prolific, with an abundance of different products that complement the needs of a turf professional. Talking to a number of the end-user attendees who had made the trip on the day, both the new powered pruner and pruning saws were described to me by several as “game-changers.”

For example, with an adjustable shear blade opening angle, the new DUP180 18V LXT brushless pruning shear accommodates four different cutting capacities up to ø30mm, and provides up to 8,800 cuts on a single charge (when used with a 6.0Ah battery).

Featuring a brushless motor and belt holster to carry the battery, it weighs 0.68kg (without battery). To further minimise user fatigue, Makita say they have engineered



Kevin Brannigan, marketing manager, and Mark Earles, Outdoor Power Equipment & Contracts manager



A new chainsaw on demo

the tool so that the control of the shear blade is interlocked with the trigger, meaning the blades will only open and close depending on the degree the trigger is depressed or released.

Additionally, an external oil port is designed for easy blade lubrication without disassembly, which the company says enhances the tool’s durability.

Kevin Brannigan, marketing manager at the manufacturer, told me: “At Makita, we continue to apply our heritage and expertise in battery technology and tool engineering to develop essential kit items, so that the professional sector has access to a vast range of battery-powered tools that meet every daily demand without the constraints of cords or petrol.”

He continued: “Whether it’s for making light work of clipping back shrubs and hedgerows, or trimming branches and small trees, tools like the DUP180 or the DUC150 pruning saw are convenient products that are designed with simplicity and ergonomics in mind.”

From my experience at their demo day as a turf professional, Makita do indeed boast a range that easily allows them to compete with any other established garden tool supplier.

I did try out several of the products on the day, and have asked the company if I could have some equipment on loan so I can do a full appraisal of some of the products in my other day job as a professional gardener.

I am certainly interested in trialling their scarifier, mowers and hedge trimmers during the course of the growing season to see just how they might work out for the professional customers of this magazine’s dealer readers. I will publish my thoughts in an upcoming edition of *TurfPro* later this year. Published every Monday, anyone interested in the professional turfcare side of the industry can subscribe for free. **Just visit www.turfpro.co.uk and sign up.**



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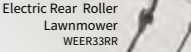


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Celebrating the past, looking to the future

The early part of the year saw *Service Dealer's* KEITH CHRISTIAN attend two major anniversaries by two very different dealerships - each with a significant presence and history in the groundscape machinery industry.

It was my privilege during the first couple of months of this year to attend two anniversary events, both of which came with an extra dimension.

Firstly, Ripon Farm Services Ltd (RFS) celebrated their 20th anniversary of their customer event, at the Royal Yorkshire Showground in Harrogate in January – whilst simultaneously marking the completion of their acquisition of F G Adamson & Son.

Devon Garden Machinery (DGM), meanwhile, were celebrating their 40th anniversary and the official opening of their new premises in Torquay in February.



Ripon Farm Services' company director Phil Gregg speaking with *Service Dealer's* Keith Christian

Ripon Farm Services:

Acquisition promises new markets

In 1982, Geoff Brown, together with Maurice Hymas, Bill Houseman and two other directors, set up their own agricultural machinery business called Ripon Farm Services, and took on both the John Deere and Land Rover franchises. In their first year, they started with 19 members of staff, and doubled their initial business plan target.

In the years following, the company grew through the purchasing of other businesses to become one of the largest agricultural machinery businesses in the north of England, covering all of the specialties required of such a large business. With over 300 staff and 14 branches, RFS has become one of the country's largest dealers.

More recently RFS concluded the purchase of F G Adamson & Son, a large family-run groundscape and garden machinery dealership with two

branches in Hull and Lincolnshire. This was to give RFS a fully-operational groundscape division handling John Deere turf and homeowner products, as well as a range of other equipment for the market. This purchase brought with it a team of 43 staff, and the related expertise to integrate a groundscape division into the RFS group.

I caught up with the team at their annual event, held at Harrogate's Yorkshire Events Centre – which this year was celebrating its 20th anniversary.

RFS were showcasing the latest technology in agricultural machinery and groundscape available from a host of manufacturers and suppliers who they represent.

Product specialists were on hand to discuss and provide advice on machine choice, setup, optimisation and job management. Visitors were encouraged to explore the latest innovations and speak to the experts, as well as get up close to the products.

A vast range of machinery was on display, from ride-on mowers through to pressure washers and hedge trimmers, plus a whole host of parts, tools and



The dealership celebrated their 20th show at the Royal Yorkshire Showground

store items from brands like Milwaukee, Draper and Portek, to name but a few. This was certainly a big commitment to the RFS customer base, and covered a huge area inside and outside of the show area. I understand that there were over 5,000 visitors across the two days.

A coming together

I was able to sit down with Phil Gregg, company director and formerly group operations manager, for a chat about RFS and their annual event. Phil has been with the company for 16 years, and came from the car industry. Looking after aftersales, branches, parts and daily operations is his stock-in-trade. Expansion and diversification in the business are high on the agenda, with large investments in facilities for both customers and staff.

The show caters for over 5,000 visitors, and features a vast array of equipment – a clear indication of the RFS commitment to its customers and potential customers across a large area of Yorkshire.

Phil explained the philosophy behind the purchase of F G Adamson & Son as a strategy to integrate a full groundscape and homeowner division within the



Visitors were encouraged to explore the latest innovations



The event showcased both ag and groundscape machinery following RFS' acquisition of F G Adamson

RFS Group with the expertise of the specialist staff from Adamson's. Phil told me: "Being able to showcase all that Adamson's have to offer at the Harrogate anniversary event is a great opportunity for us to highlight the commitment of the group to different markets, and to celebrate the completion of the purchase of Adamson's – plus the integration of two family businesses."

I also was able to drag Michael Adamson away from his busy area of the show for a chat about the coming together of the two companies, and what the future may hold. I first met Michael in the early days of his career, as FGA were a customer of mine in my previous life at Claymore. I have watched the transitions within the family business, and the succession that has kept the business at the forefront with the expansion to a new branch in Lincoln.

F G Adamson & Son was started by Mike's grandfather some 77 years ago, and has passed through three generations of the family, with family members still involved in the business – a classic example of family succession, and the very personal

makeup of this business. Whilst the industry has bemoaned the creation of the so called 'super dealer', in this case it is in itself a form of succession.

Speaking to Mike at this busy event was interesting, as we discussed both the old and the new, the changes over the years, and the eventual sale to RFS (and how that will help to grow the business within RFS). Mike told me: "The sale brings the opportunity for investment in the business, and secures its and the staff's future within the larger organisation - but will still allow the individuals to apply their particular skillsets whilst making a significant contribution to the group as a whole."

Like Phil, Mike was clear that it is all about customer service, and that there is a positive future because of the coming together with RFS.

The opportunity for an old diehard like me to be able to catch up with Phil and Mike at their busy event was a delight, and, despite all the shows and open days I have been to, this one was exceptional in its planning, size and customer turnout. My thanks to both of them for their time.



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*Based on an average working time of 8h/day, Petrol price of £1.58/L, average Alkylate petrol price £3.42/L and Electric power 0.25 £/kWh.

82ZTC152 Zero Turn		Service Costs	
Product Price	£14,999.00	Petrol	£43,332
	–		Electricity
Batteries and charger	–	Product Price	–
Energy Source (3,000 hours) petrol/electricity	£27,051.00 (Petrol)		
Service Costs (over 3 years)	£1,282.00		
TOTAL COST	£43,332.00		£32,179.00

£11,153 savings in TCO*

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Devon Garden Machinery:

New premises shows commitment to customers

I was delighted to be invited to Devon Garden Machinery's (DGM) 40th anniversary evening celebration, marking the official opening of their new premises – in Torquay in early February.

Having been in the garden machinery and groundsare business since my career started, and coming from the West Country, I have always had a soft spot for the dealers in the southwest – they always made me welcome in my early career as a rep. So it was a fantastic opportunity to catch up with DGM and many of the stalwarts from the West Country dealerships who were guests at the party, as well as a number of DGM's main suppliers.

The Torquay-based family business is a distributor for brands such as Toro, Iseki, Honda and Husqvarna, and is well-established as one of the largest robotic mower centres in the southwest, serving commercial and



Alan Dommett with the dealership's 'Swiss Army Knife,' Dave Gibbings

private customers across the region. It recently moved into a brand-new building adjacent to its previous site in Kerswell Gardens, as part of a new development featuring an Aldi store and a Costa Coffee. DGM are probably the oldest Iseki dealer in the UK, having handled the brand for over 30 years.

DGM was founded by Alan Dommett in 1984. Alan was formerly with Stanley West, a Ransome dealer. The company proudly has three generations of the family involved in the business – Steve and Charlotte, Jake, and, of course, Alan, who claims to be taking a backseat in his 80th year. The family have made a massive commitment to the future with a long-planned investment in new premises. Steve Dommett says it was not an easy road to get to completion, and it was interrupted by Covid - but they were determined to ensure that the family business and the Dommett legacy would have a long and secure future.

According to Steve and Charlotte Dommett, the move to the new building provided a perfect opportunity to invest in solar energy, helping to reduce the company's carbon emissions whilst saving on energy costs. Financed by Ignition, and installed by Sun Energy, the investment includes 190 solar panels as part of a 75 kW system that will save around 13.2 tonnes of CO2 per year.

DGM were awarded the *Service Dealer Professional Turfcare Dealer of the Year Award* in 2023 – with the judges commenting: *"The company go above and beyond to keep turf care professionals working at all times, caring passionately about their customers and the service they provide."*

With a staff of 27, and covering most of the counties of Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and part of Dorset, DGM are a busy dealership that are loyal to the brands they sell and prefer face-to-face to Internet selling. Interestingly, being sited next to Aldi, they believe they may see a slight change in their walk-in customer profile, but will adapt if this happens.

This philosophy is reflected in the magnificent new building, with a spacious showroom, 'communal' reception counter, large workshops and yard.



DGM are probably the longest-standing Iseki dealer in the UK

A personal celebration

The showroom was turned into a themed bar and buffet area for the evening, which snaked through the whole space, turning it into a nightclub scene with a band performing late into the evening and a special appearance by Georgia, Steve and Charlotte's daughter, who sang for the 150 or so guests in support of the Teenage Cancer Trust.

I was treated to a personal tour of the new facilities by Alan, meeting Dave Gibbings – who Alan described as the 'Swiss Army Knife' of DGM due to his many talents in the business. Each service technician has their own workshop bay to work in. I also met Jake Dommett, Steve and Charlotte's son, who is a service engineer in the business, and Jeanette, Alan's wife, who has always been a part of the business - and my saviour at many a West Country show with the offer of tea and cake for a poor, lonely rep!

This was a most personal celebration of the company's 40-year history,

Alan's 80th birthday, and the official opening of the new premises. The building was handed over in the early part of 2023, but the opening was combined with DGM's 40th anniversary. With speeches from family members, and a gathering of friends, family and business partners, it was a great opportunity for all to catch up with each-other. Attendees included industry stalwarts from southwest dealerships like P.J. Fleg, Radmore and Tucker, MST, Wilcocks and others, some of whom are now retired and some of whom are still in the game. There were also representatives from most of DGM's suppliers and business providers, making up a fantastic gathering of like-minded people and an indication of the importance of DGM to the industry as a whole – and the local community, in particular.

What an amazing achievement for a family business of three generations, who can be proud of their achievement, of their special new premises, and of their vision for the future of the business.



DGM's showroom was converted into a nightclub scene for the anniversary celebration



Matt Coleman of Reesink, with Jake Dommett

Show helps shift used stock



Most years, *Service Dealer* reports from Ernest Doe's annual Doe Show, looking at some of the latest products from the dealer's key franchises and assessing the mood of the new ag and turf equipment trade. This year, though, MARTIN RICKATSON turned his attention to the used sector.

More often than not, sealing the deal on a new machine sale - certainly on big-ticket items, such as tractors, combines, handlers and self-propelled sprayers, as well as professional turf equipment - involves taking a trade-in of the machine being replaced. But, while a yard full of used equipment may tell a story of a good season for new sales, shifting on that kit promptly at a decent margin is central to the successful operation of any franchised dealership.

For eastern English 19-branch dealer Ernest Doe, its annual three-day Doe Show – held at its headquarters branch at Ulting, near Maldon in Essex – is used not just as a way of connecting customers with suppliers and their latest products, and perhaps finalising some new sales, but also as an opportunity to put stocks of ex-demo, ex-hire and used machinery in front of potential buyers.

“Our year-round job on the used machinery side is ultimately to help our sales teams to retail new equipment,” points out Matt Hart, used machinery manager for Ernest Doe. “That’s by assessing and pricing trade-ins as quickly as possible, so that a deal can be agreed on the new replacement.

“For every new sale, more often than not there will be a trade-in behind it, and we begin appraising that immediately so we can finalise the deal on the new machine. It’s then important for us to find new homes for that equipment as soon as possible, ideally retailing it back into our area so that we retain the parts and service business. As we would commonly know the machine well – and have its full service history – if it was retailed and serviced by us, then it’s doubly reassuring for the next owner. If we have agreed a deal with a customer on a trade-in, then we will service and sort it to the standard

they would expect, but, as a rule, we would not invest too much time in a trade-in generally before that point.

“If a sales representative has made a conquest sale and taken in a machine from another brand, generally we aim to keep such machines on our books for as little time as possible, moving them on promptly so our focus is on our franchise brands.

“The Doe Show gives us a three-day opportunity to put trade-ins, ex-hire equipment and demo machines in front of potential customers, who know we are keen to do a deal. This is not just a marketing event, providing the chance to look over new machines and see some at work – although, of course, it also serves that purpose. For both new and used equipment, it’s a sales event as well, and we are keen to do deals on the three days of the show. That applies just as much to our used machinery as it does to new equipment and what’s in our showroom.

“We bring in machines from across our network, from Norfolk down to Kent, across into Sussex and up to Herts and Cambs, with a used stocklist detailing specification and prices on a large display board. The breadth of our geographical coverage means the types and sizes of machine that come through each branch span a broad range (with tractors, in particular, we rarely see the same sort from one day to the next) so we have something to suit everyone.

“Everything is priced to sell, with a little more discount where possible on anything we may have had in stock for a while. With ex-hire and used plus new machines all priced on-site, in essence we have three categories from which a customer can choose, whatever their budget.”

Moving on used stock promptly is an essential part of cashflow management, and having a team focused on used machinery is key to dealership success, particularly as

dealer businesses grow larger, acknowledges Angus Doe, managing director at Ernest Doe.

“Although I would always like it to be lower, our team has continued to do a great job of moving on our used stock, particularly as the market has slowed of late. It’s all part of the cashflow that comprises all parts of our business.

“With issues getting hold of machines thanks to the post-Covid component supply bottleneck now having been well and truly reversed, most dealers are carrying excess stock, a situation obviously not helped by higher interest rates.

“Those Covid-induced supply problems left us with a further challenge, in that with new machines taking longer to get hold of, each known, planned trade-in was older and higher-houred when it eventually became possible to supply the customer with their new machine and take in the old one, reducing its value.”

However, says Matt, company policy is to err on the side of caution and overestimate the hours likely to have clocked up on a machine due as a trade-in at a future date.

“That helps us to address such new machine supply issues, should they occur, and to be as certain as we can be of the future value of a machine come trade-in time.”

Meeting the challenge

The trend towards farms becoming fewer in number and larger in size is, of course, being reflected in the tractors and equipment they require, and this has created a challenge for dealers in finding second-hand homes for large and sometimes high-houred machines when they are traded in. With service contracts having become commonplace, though, used buyers can have confidence that the machine they are buying has been dealer-serviced and maintained exactly as intended.



The annual Doe Show offers Ernest Doe the opportunity to put used machines from across its network in front of potential customers

Matt points out: "It's probably a little more challenging than when there were higher numbers of smaller combines, but the homes are out there. The bigger units normally find a home with someone who is stepping up in capacity to do more acres, or get their existing harvest done faster on good, dry days, and the 800-to-1,000-acre farms are increasingly spending money on larger three-year-old combines capable of twice that annual workload rather than replacing their drying systems, so they almost go out to pasture and have a slightly easier life."

"The Doe Show attracts keen buyers, knowing that we have a good selection of used machines and are keen to sell, and we managed to sell two mid-sized rotary New Holland CR8.80 combines on the morning of the show's first day."

"Some do still go for export, particularly to northern Europe markets like France, but that market has changed because of Brexit and the additional export rules, such as machine hygiene, that apply, but also because of the cost of haulage – with a header of more than 9m/30ft, two loads are required for combine and head, doubling the haulage cost. The complexity of equipment has also had an effect, meaning fewer tractor and combine buyers in the likes of Africa."

"We are still doing a fair bit of export trade, but Brexit has certainly affected things – there are more procedures to go through. It has also cut out some of the middlemen we used to sell through, usually because the end buyer didn't speak English. That system worked nicely, but now, with different export procedures, they have disappeared in many cases, and we are dealing directly with overseas buyers. But we still have our regular trade customers with whom we have worked for many years, who offer their end users a one-stop shop for what they are seeking."

Differences in labour costs between countries also have a significant effect on the used export trade.

Says Matt: "A few years ago, we were sending significant

numbers of harder-worked tractors straight to Poland, where cheaper labour rates made it economic for engineers there to put in the necessary investment into such machines before moving them onto the next customer. At the same time, they would pay a little bit more for the machines because of their lower labour rates."

"Unfortunately, the difference in rates has narrowed of late, and we are also always at the mercy of significant changes in exchange rates. But they can work in our favour, and we still get busy Mondays with foreign buyers calling because rates have moved to their advantage."

Beyond self-propelled equipment, Angus says that the market for implements – such as ploughs, cultivators, drills, rolls and trailers – is still fairly buoyant, but this sector is well-served by used equipment specialists.

"Our customer base seeks high-end, well-maintained equipment. We want machines on our books for as little time as possible, and have to keep stock moving. A franchise dealer cannot hold onto trade-in tillage equipment, such as tine drills to wait for higher demand in a wet year – that's a role fulfilled by the used specialists, who can perhaps hold out over the long-term for the price they require on a machine, finding a buyer at that price because of a difficult autumn, for example."

"Implements such as twin-disc fert spreaders tend to be sold off through the trade, as they can be a challenge to sell on because we cannot be sure what materials have gone through them. We may take this sort of thing in at a trade value – we have a couple of traders that would put prices on items such as these, reflective of condition and age. A few years ago, good spreaders were making good money, but the second-hand market then became oversupplied and fewer found new homes at auction."

Seasonal effects also continue to drive the trade's ebbs and flows.



The company usually aims to promptly move on conquest sale trade-ins to keep its focus on its franchise brands



Angus Doe, Ernest Doe md (right), with used machinery manager Matt Hart



Machines are brought to the show from across Ernest Doe's network, with a used stocklist detailing spec and prices on a large display board



The event also means that everything – from slow-moving and old-stock spares to wheels and weight blocks – are up for sale on the day

Angus notes: "Through the winter, we will take trade-in balers well ahead of the season, giving us plenty of time to find buyers for the summer ahead. But with big tractors or combines, if we take in a machine at the end of a season and cannot find a home for it until the beginning of the next, that's quite a long time to have it on our books – so timing is important both for us and the customer."

"But here at the show, everything is for sale, and we will be doing deals all the way through, and concluding many others in the days after the event finishes. We are happy to work with a customer's preferred finance provider, but we can help with finance where necessary on a used purchase, and have a broker in attendance over the three days of the show to help sort the best package for each customer."

"This was our 64th event, and, despite the challenges farming looks to be facing, we've been really pleased with the continued support of our suppliers, and with the level of used equipment trade that the show continues to attract."



Professional user acceptance of battery power has evolved

Is it time for dealers to embrace the battery revolution?



STEVE ROSKELL, marketing director (EMEA) for EGO Power Plus, believes the latest advances in cordless gardening and landscaping tool technology mean that now is the time for dealers to seize the moment.

Petrol power has served dealers well for decades, but it won't be around forever. Lithium battery technology has steadily been gaining ground, and will soon replace petrol as the dominant technology for most outdoor power equipment.

There are three triggers leading to a tipping point in a technology transition, and we are now witnessing them all: price point, performance, and market acceptance.

Price point

Compared to equivalent petrol-powered products, battery powered products offer a very attractive return on investment. The key here is to change mindsets by looking at the whole-life costs of outdoor equipment and tools – a different perspective, but a more accurate one.

At EGO Power Plus, we carried out a cost comparison test based on a contractor buying three Pro X tools – a hedge trimmer, grass trimmer and leaf blower. We calculated costs for everything they'd need to operate these tools – so, for our Pro X series tools, we included the backpack harness, batteries and rapid charger, as well as energy costs, and, for the petrol-powered equivalents, we included fuel and servicing costs.

The results of the analysis confirmed that buying and owning cordless tools is cheaper than buying petrol-powered kit – over a third cheaper in fact. This result has not changed since we first conducted this research six years ago.

Intelligent garden care Cable-free



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AGS Active Guidance System **ePower**

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A 5000
A 3000

A 1500
A 750



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Greenhouse gas emissions will become increasingly important to trades and professionals

On top of this, there are other financial benefits for the end user – lower service costs on the cordless tools, and far lower ‘fuel’ costs. What this means in pounds and pence is huge for your customers. If a contractor or council is running their equipment for three years, our trio of cordless tools would save them over £1,450 during that period. If they keep the kit for five years, the total savings are an estimated £6,668 compared to the petrol-powered machines.

Performance

In the electric vehicle (EV) market, the term “range anxiety” was coined to describe concerns over whether the batteries would provide enough power for a vehicle to reach its destination, and it is fair to say that these anxieties also exist for many professional OPE equipment users.

When we started this journey, domestic tool users and light-duty users were quicker in adopting this new technology than heavy trade users. It was fine for someone maintaining their garden, but less ideal for trade users and contractors, who need many more hours of operation per day. However, developments in battery technology and improved runtimes have made a significant difference in people’s overall perception of the power and performance battery-powered tools can deliver in even the toughest conditions.

It is also fair to say that it’s not just the batteries but the tools themselves that have evolved significantly since those

early days. Intense applications require tools that have been designed and manufactured to match the exacting demands of the professional user.

Some dealers might be surprised at what is now achievable with lithium power. For example, our Pro X series is specifically aimed at heavy commercial users, such as contractors and councils, meaning the tools are more hard-wearing and perform as well as – if not better than – the petrol equivalents. Notably, the tools conform to the IPX5 rating, enabling them to continue providing reliable performance without disruption from weather conditions.

Most importantly, the batteries and charging solutions combine to ensure that runtime is no longer an issue for professional users – the key is to ensure the user has readily-charged batteries at their fingertips. Many manufacturer’s batteries can be used interchangeably across their entire product range, making it possible to carry on working even quicker than refuelling a petrol-powered tool.

In a first for the industry, we have introduced a modular charging system to the market in response to this demand. A contractor could start with the three-port battery charging solution, for instance, and then add more docking stations as their need for more cordless equipment and batteries expands with the demands of their business.

The charging system allows up to 70 of its 56V ARC Lithium batteries to

be charged sequentially from a single charging hub running off a standard 13A power supply. What this means for the user is reduced complexity, as there’s now no need to swap out multiple batteries and chargers. EGO also offers a DC-to-DC charging unit for mobile recharging during the day. Featuring a large-format 40AH battery, which can recharge a 2.5Ah battery 15 times in a single day, this can all fit into a van to ensure everything is close at hand.

All of our Pro X tools are also IoT-enabled, to prevent problems that lead to downtime. Our Fleet app provides users with full tool visibility over aspects such as tool usage, tool location, and tool service reminders.

It is important to note that, as the favourability towards batteries grows, so does the need to discard batteries as they reach the end-of-life stage environmentally. It is the responsibility of the distributor and manufacturer to ensure that dealers can have their end-of-life batteries collected. Due to the volume of batteries in the UK marketplace, there has simultaneously been an increase in battery recycling companies, some of which our UK distributor, Henton & Chattell, is currently exploring.

Market acceptance

Market acceptance of cordless tools for the trade has two main drivers. Firstly, legislation and regulation are only going one way, and that is in favour of battery tools. Petrol tools are up to

three times noisier, plus they create air pollution at the point of use – neither of which are good for the operator or the environment. Furthermore, we now know that tool vibration can cause long-term health problems for operators. Our research found that 80% of the petrol-powered tools we studied breached the legal limit for vibrations, meaning they cannot lawfully be used for a full eight-hour shift. Cordless tools do not breach this limit.

Furthermore, greenhouse gas emissions will become increasingly important to trades and professionals. This is because large organisations that are required to report on their carbon footprints have to include emissions from contractors in these calculations. Many public and private sector companies are therefore looking to their supply chains and service providers to cut these Scope 3 emissions. Petrol-powered tools can have deceptively high emissions, too. Research commissioned by ourselves found that a petrol leaf blower can emit up to 11 times more greenhouse gases than a Ford Fiesta.

Beyond the regulatory landscape, there is another, perhaps even more important reality – user acceptance. Battery power is now such a commonplace part of our lives that we understand it and no longer fear it. With the questions around price and performance now firmly addressed, and cordless tools providing a better user experience, the transition is now inevitable.

Dealer benefits

In the same way that end users have adapted to cordless tools, you will have to tweak your business model to accommodate battery power - but the benefits far outweigh the risks.

A question we often get asked is about the technical skillset required to service, maintain and repair cordless equipment. It is true that the drive train is completely different to what your mechanics and engineers are used to, but, in many cases, it is also a lot simpler.

All of our Pro X tools, for example, are IoT-enabled, with the aim of preventing

problems that lead to downtime. Our Fleet app monitors fault status and acts to prevent tools from being overexerted, protecting the equipment and improving productivity. In the event of a breakdown, you can also access data such as fault codes, meaning less time spent on diagnosing a problem. Both you and the user can also have battery health information at their fingertips. And, of course, the best manufacturers will offer resources to help you with this transition. This can range from sales support to help you convince your clients to go cordless, to training on battery technology and tool SMR.

However, many dealers have a healthy revenue stream from servicing petrol-powered tools so you may be alarmed at the prospect of losing that, given the reduction in SMR requirements for cordless tools. We believe the trade-off is worth it, for one main reason: customer loyalty.

The first element of customer loyalty is that a product range like Pro X is designed to help you capture more business from each client. The batteries and charging stations provide a platform to support all tools across the range. For example, if a customer buys a leaf blower along with the batteries and charger, it makes commercial

sense for them to come back to you for the hedge trimmer, then a mower, and so on.

The second and most obvious element in this equation is that, if customers want cordless, and you don’t offer it, they will go somewhere else. If you don’t want your dealership to get left behind, now is the time to start talking to cordless tool manufacturers about adding them to your customer offering.

The other element to the equation is the relationship that you as a dealer have with your customers. In the past, it may have been enough to ask a customer how much power they need, and advise them based on that, but today you need to fully understand the needs of your customers’ businesses so that you can accurately meet their battery needs. Instead, ask questions such as: ‘How long will you use this tool for on a daily basis?’ This in-depth understanding is immeasurably valuable, as it will help you to identify the correct number of batteries and the correct charging solution, which, in turn, creates sales opportunities. But it also means that you will supply your customers with exactly the right tools for them, soon creating a portfolio of life-long customers.



Battery tool sales can create customer loyalty for a family of products



BUSINESS MONITOR

Taking the temperature of the dealer network, sponsored by STIHL

Dealers embracing robots

Greater acceptance of the technology than when we last surveyed in 2019

We had a decent response from dealer readers to our robotic mower survey – the first we had run on the subject since April 2019.

We were interested to hear whether attitudes had significantly changed since we last polled readers five years ago, when there appeared to be a fair degree of scepticism amongst respondents regarding the technology. This time around, the needle did indeed appear to have moved positively – with the most given response to the question ‘which comment best sums up your dealership’s attitude to robotic mowers?’ being quite telling. The option most chosen was: ‘Good signs, but I feel they will grow in importance in time.’

Most respondents did indeed stock robotic mowers (only 9% said they didn’t at all), with an impressive **82% saying sales had risen during the past five years.**

Also, supplementary revenue from customers of robotic solutions certainly seems achievable according to our respondents, with **57% saying purchasers return for service work** and 43% saying additional sales are made some of the time.

How many brands of robotic mowers do you stock?



Which of these comments best sums up your dealership’s attitude to robotic mowers?

Good signs, but I feel they will grow in importance in time **43%**

They are a vital part of my offering **35%**

They are completely not for me or my customers **13%**

I stock them, but they hold limited interest to my customers **9%**



Have your sales of robotic mowers over the past five years...



Do your robotic customers return to you for service work?



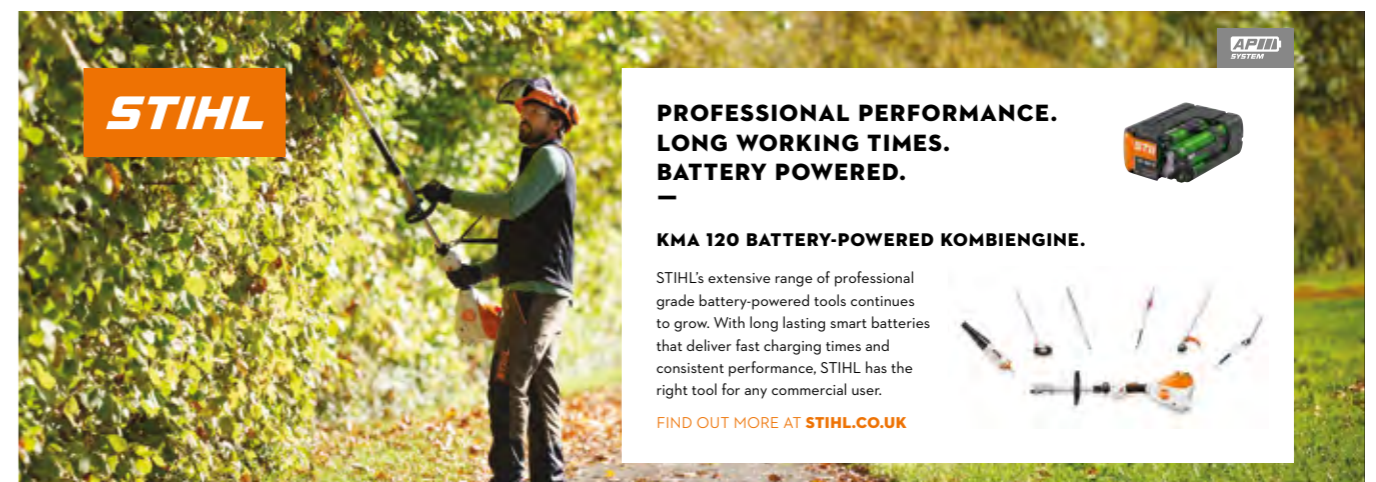
Do customers who purchase a robotic mower from you make additional purchases?



Your say...

We asked you: how do you feel about the robotic mower market today and how it relates to your dealership?

- Taking into account from *Service Dealer’s* previous survey, there has been a significant jump in standards for robotic mowers, with a select few manufacturers competing against each other in what has turned into a tech war over who has the best kit. Our experience over the years is that it still really is the sale and after-service of the product that is key to a dealer making money. The negative, in my view, is the dealers loading up with manufacturers’ robots of all varying sizes and types, which is normally driven by cost but often burns the dealer’s pocket when something doesn’t go well. This industry is well-known to be specialist, so why stock so many brands? You only turn into the Amazon of the industry – and there is only one winner in that game!
- The interest in the market seems to be increasing every year, but I feel there is still a lack of technical knowledge in aftersales support, and we have struggled to apply the same level of aftersales support as we can with more traditional products due to this.
- It remains a confusing market for us, with not many sales each year, and the occasional sale disrupts the natural flow of the dealership. I still believe it will be the future, though, but they will become so automated that they will be sold direct to users by manufacturers.
- It’s clean, profitable, and I’m not sure where we’d be without it today. We installed our first machine in 2015, and have a park of over 200 now. Sure, we have issues with some installations, and issues with product – it’s an evolving medium – but who doesn’t like a challenge?! Customers get attached to Robby (the robot) or Mack (the knife), and are therefore keen to keep them maintained so the service work keeps coming. Our auto-mower technician – and one-time apprentice – is very much wedded to the job, and it definitely helps having “young blood” working on the tech, so this is definitely an avenue to attract youth into the trade. The market continues to grow, the product evolves – we just need to maintain our servicing dealer position.
- I like robotic mowers very much, but a lot of our customers are older people who can hardly use a smartphone! As for new robotic mowers that use virtual boundaries, they’re a great idea when working – but my staff have said they are not going up ladders or scaffolding. We are garden machinery dealers, not builders or aerial installers, so I shall talk people out of that. If a customer asks what I would have, it would be a ride-on.
- Robotics take much longer to sell than traditional mowers. The profit margins do not reflect that, so us dealers are not going to move to robotics until customers want it.
- I feel it is a product that you can’t afford to ignore, as the customer demand is ever growing. So stocking is very important, as there are so many out there on the internet.



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7 Principles of a High Performing Dealership



Sara Hey, president of business development at Bob Clements International – the dealership development company based in Missouri – shares the insights she offers U.S. dealers with *Service Dealer's* UK readership every issue.



Over the years that my team and I have been working with dealers, one of the most common questions that we get asked is: what makes a dealership successful?

We have had hundreds of conversations with both dealers and manufacturers about what we believe makes a dealer successful, and the roadmap to get there. Through those conversations, I have put together the Seven Principles of a High-Performing Dealership.

Stop the bleeding.

There are just a handful of things that cause your bleeding - identify them and stop the flow of cash. Nothing can succeed in your dealership if you do not have a strong cashflow. There are several 'cashflow killers,' with one being overtime pay. In almost every case, if you are having to pay overtime, there is a strong possibility that your processes are broken and efficiency is lacking. Be sure to evaluate your insurance coverage to uncover cost savings and verify with a professional accountant to be sure you're not overpaying taxes. Keep in mind that having the wrong employees on your staff has a direct impact on cashflow, because they can damage customer relationships.

Generate instant income.

Start picking up cash that's lying on the floor. A first step is to stop under-pricing parts and service. One dealer I talked with was 15% underpriced on parts, and he was doing \$700,000 a year in parts sales. That means he was leaving \$75,000 a year on the floor because he wasn't tweaking his margins. Avoid 'pooling ignorance' by setting service rates based on other dealerships in the area. If you move your prices up, everyone else will follow. Be sure to bundle service, parts packages and extended warranties into the original equipment purchase. Finally, don't negotiate with cash. Instead, negotiate with service and parts packages.

Build your culture.

It's up to you to build a culture that encourages employees to grow both personally and professionally. You must create a culture where employees know what you expect of them and are passionate about what you're doing - and you can only do that with weekly meetings. Meetings don't have to be time-consuming to be impactful. Another way for employees to better understand what you want from them is to get them involved in training opportunities.

Define and refine your processes.

Repeatability creates profitability. The more you can repeat an action, the better you become at performing it. You must look at every department and every process. Ultimately, you want your customers to have a positive experience, so work backward from that point and say: what do I have to do to make that happen? And then, keep refining those processes.

Create a plan.

Do you know where you are going or how to get there? It's important to remember that hope is not a plan. Hope is not a strategy. You need to stop chasing fires and chasing ghosts, and put together a detailed strategy if you hope to reach your goals.

Incorporate the people.

Hire the right people, give them direction, and then empower them to achieve your goals. I challenge you to look at your people. For instance, walk up to your parts counter and silently say to yourself: do I have the right people in place? Then, do this for your service department and your sales department.

Measure, monitor and adjust.

This is the most important step toward becoming a high-performing dealership. Once you do the first six steps, your job as an owner or manager is to constantly go back and measure, monitor and adjust the process.

By taking and applying these principles to your dealership, you will be able to move your dealership towards your ultimate goals.



“Can you price match that?!”



Joanne Balmer, of Balmers GM muses on that perpetual hot-topic of showroom sales verses online sales.

At the time of writing my diary entry, what we like to call the 'Silly Season' is well and truly underway - and to be honest, although we already feel tired and in much need of a summer holiday, I'm pleased to report that domestically, we've had a strong start to the season, despite the temperamental weather over these past few weeks.

We all know that when the good weather finally does arrive, it gets the Great British Public into their gardens and outdoor spaces, and in turn, hopefully into our showrooms and online stores too. Which leads me nicely onto the perpetual hot topic of our industry: showroom sales versus online sales . . .

At Balmers GM, we're fortunate to have a fantastic showroom facility that we're really proud of, but of course it comes with all the usual on-going running costs such as heating, lighting, business rates, staffing etc. In addition, we also have our online store, and although we remain competitively priced, we won't, and don't get involved with the race-to-the bottom online sellers. We'd rather leave them to it as, frankly, it doesn't tend to end well for some.

However, I am finding it increasingly frustrating when the Great British Public rock up to our showroom, spend an hour or more with a member of our showroom team, asking every conceivable question about the machinery that we have on offer, (and may I add - all whilst enjoying our warm and ambient showroom), to then pull out their smartphones in order to consult Google for the cheapest place that they can find it, followed by those ever so familiar words; 'can you price match that?'. It's only human nature I suppose, but nonetheless it drives me to distraction!

With all that said, and as frustrating as it can be at times,

we'll be keeping our showrooms just as they are, as we find having a good mix of both the showrooms and online store serves our business model well.

Moving over to the commercial side of our business, it's certainly been a more all-round 'steady' start to the 2024 season - with The Great British Weather playing a major part in that. I've lost count of the number of times that we've had the same conversation in the office and asked ourselves the same question, 'when is it going to stop raining?'

I touched on the weather in my last diary entry, and although it's warmed up a touch here in the

North-West, the ground is so soft and

sodden, that I often find myself wondering should we consider stocking canoes, paddle boards, waders and waterproofs rather than garden and groundcare machinery??

We do have plenty of new and used commercial stock ready and available to go, which is a welcome position that we find ourselves in, and we're finding that manufacturer supply is more or less back to what it was pre-Covid times - with maybe the exception of one or two of the larger manufacturers who appear to

be following a more Ag-led approach and building machinery to order instead of

keeping higher stock levels themselves.

As with every positive comes a negative, which for us is that used commercial machinery stock values have dropped off, reflecting the fact that new machinery supply is back on track - but I guess that's not just industry-specific to groundcare, that's happened in many different industries too.

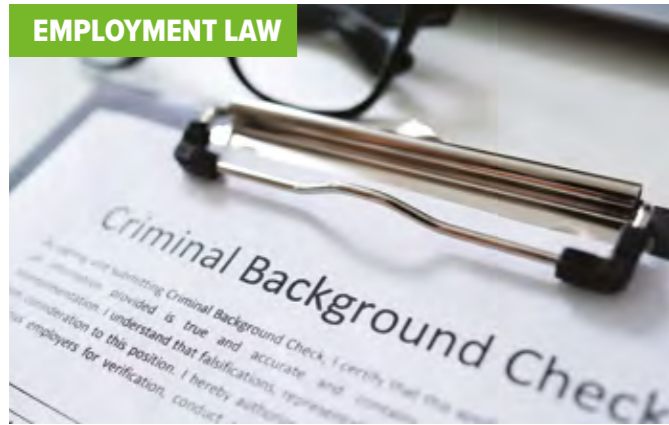
I'll sign off for now with my thoughts turning to the fast-approaching summer show season, whilst politely asking the weather gods to please stop raining!





Job applicants with criminal records?

EMPLOYMENT LAW



It may come as a surprise to many but, according to an April 2023 report in the Financial Times, some 12 million people have a criminal conviction. This makes the chances of an employer having received an application from someone with a criminal record fairly high, writes SME Digest editor, ADAM BERNSTEIN.

Many employers assume that disclosing a criminal conviction is a legal requirement, regardless of the time elapsed since the offence. But, as Adam Morris, a solicitor at Wright Hassall, comments, for the majority of roles, this is not the case. In fact, he says: “Employers are restricted in what they can ask applicants during the recruitment process, not only to protect the latter’s privacy, but also to limit any prejudice or negative treatment an applicant may encounter.”

The circumstances governing the need for an applicant to disclose a criminal record to a prospective employer depends on the type of job being applied for, and whether or not the conviction is spent.

Rehabilitation of offenders

Morris details that the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 was designed to

help those with convictions get back into employment. He says that the Act “ensures that all cautions, and most convictions – bar the most serious, including life sentences – may become ‘spent’ after a set rehabilitation period, the length of which varies according to the length of the original sentence.” This, he says, “effectively means that, once an individual’s conviction is spent, they should be treated as if they had not been convicted of that spent offence at all, and they are under no obligation to declare it for most purposes.”

Under recent legislation - the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 - which came into force in October 2023, there have been significant changes in the rehabilitation periods of which employers need to be aware. In essence, for those with a custodial sentence of between one and four years, the rehabilitation period has been reduced from seven to four years (from

the day the sentence was completed). Those with custodial sentences of over four years – bar those already excluded, such as life sentences or sentences of imprisonment for public protection – will see convictions become spent for the first time seven years from the day they completed their sentence.

Despite this relaxation, Morris says that there are roles where employees can be expected to disclose convictions regardless of whether they are spent. This is covered by the Exceptions Order, and includes professions relating to the care and/or supervision of children, healthcare professions, legal professionals, and certain people employed in the financial sector.

Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)

In order to assess whether or not an individual is suitable for work in certain

positions of trust, Morris says that employers can carry out a DBS check, which provides them with the necessary information to make that decision.

“There are,” he explains, “three levels of certificate: basic, standard, and enhanced, and all can be obtained by any individual over the age of 16 – although a countersignature confirming entitlement is required for the standard and enhanced certificates.”

In overview, the basic certificate contains details of unspent criminal convictions, the standard certificate contains details of all spent and unspent convictions and cautions (as well as police reprimands and warnings), and the enhanced certificate contains the same information as a standard certificate plus relevant police information and information relating to statutory lists (for instance, those unsuitable to work with children).

Morris points out that only employers recruiting for roles contained within the Exceptions Order are eligible to obtain a standard or enhanced DBS certificate. He says: “If this is the case, this requirement must be set out in the job advert. However, employers should be mindful that disclosure is not a blanket disclosure of all convictions and cautions, and will only show basic details of the offence, not the context.” It should be noted that youth cautions, reprimands and warnings are no longer automatically disclosed.

Criminal record data and the ICO

Understandably, individuals are precious about information they would naturally consider private, including their criminal past. As a result, Morris says that the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) offers useful guidance on pre-employment vetting. He explains that, if employers are intending to vet applicants, this should be made clear early on in the recruitment process – and it should be set out how it will be conducted.

He adds: “Employers should leave vetting until as late as possible in the process, and confine it to those who have been selected for the job, rather than subjecting all shortlisted

candidates to vetting. Further, they also need to be clear why they need criminal records data, what benefit they will derive from having it, and be aware of the intended outcome for the person concerned.”

Finally, Morris says that employers must ensure that the data complies with other relevant law. This means the need to have data protection policies up-to-date and fully compliant with GDPR. And he gives an example: those normally carrying out a DBS check as a matter of course “may risk an ICO investigation if they have no lawful purpose for holding such data.”

Dealing with information about a criminal record

There are sectors where certain convictions will preclude an applicant from being employed in that role – for instance, a teacher who is on a barred list. However, Morris says that, where there is no industry guidance or legislation, employers should use their own judgment as to the weight to attach to an applicant’s criminal history. In particular, he says: “Employers may also wish to consider whether the conviction is relevant to the position in question, the length of time since the offence was committed, and whether the applicant’s circumstances have changed since the conviction.” He continues: “Although employers may consider unspent convictions - and this is necessary if the role falls within the Exceptions Order - they should not play a deciding role in a decision whether or not to employ an individual.”

Summary

Criminal history is an understandably sensitive area, both for employers and job applicants. The law allows those with a criminal record to move on with their lives and not be dogged by an event that might have taken place decades ago. Nonetheless, employers need to tread carefully, both to prevent inappropriate individuals from taking positions where they may pose a risk and to protect those wanting to stay on the right side of the law.

TAXATION



A story of tax tails and investment dogs

There’s an old adage in the world of accounting: ‘Don’t let the tax tail wag the investment dog.’ In essence, we – whether as individuals or in business – shouldn’t make moves to minimise tax that might be regretted later on, writes SME Digest editor, Adam Bernstein.

However, none of this precludes a business from doing whatever it can to lawfully become tax-efficient. David Wright, a technical officer at the Association of Taxation Technicians, thinks that tax efficiency should start with remuneration planning.

As a business grows, incorporation may be tax-efficient, as there are lower rates of corporation tax compared to income tax. However, as he points out: “The downside is that this introduces a second layer of taxation – corporation tax is due by the company, and then

personal taxes are payable on extracting profits to the owner.”

Of course, a corporate structure allows control over how much income the owner is taxable on, allowing them to maximise use of their lower-rate tax bands each year. And, for Wright, this can be especially valuable in the event of business profits fluctuating, as “it allows profits to be kept within the company in good years to reduce the owner’s exposure to the top rates of income tax. By comparison, a sole trader would be liable to tax on a bumper year’s profits in full.” He also points out that, if the company has lean years, the owner may still be able to extract company reserves as salary and dividend to make use of their personal tax allowances and basic rate tax band.

Wright does caveat his comments: “Unlike dividends, salaries are an allowable expense when calculating a company’s taxable profits, so it may appear sensible to remunerate the owner with just salary. However, National Insurance Contributions (NICs) apply to salaries for both the company and the recipient.” Also, dividends are not subject to NICs, and the recipient pays lower tax rates than they do on salary, which is why he says: “There is a balancing act between the two.”

It shouldn’t be forgotten that NICs provide for future state pension entitlement along with other state benefits. For this reason, Wright suggests paying salary equivalent to at least the Secondary Threshold (£9,100) to ensure a year ‘counts’ for state pension contributions, but probably no more than the personal allowance (£12,570), above which PAYE starts to be incurred. (This may change from April 2024).

Tax-efficient perks

Benefits appeal to employees, and, done correctly, non-cash remuneration from a company can be highly tax-efficient. Unfortunately, Wright warns that this doesn’t apply to owners of sole traders or partnerships, but does to any employees they take on.

In more detail, he says that certain benefits in kind – such as employer pension contributions, providing one



mobile phone per employee, and free staff canteens – can be provided tax-free. Also, staff events, such as an annual Christmas party or other such function, can also be laid on tax-free, as long as the total cost for all events in the year does not exceed £150 per head, with the costs also claimed against the company’s taxable profits.

Cars have for years been targeted by HMRC, and as Wright points out: “Electric cars can no longer be provided tax-free to employees - but, until April 2025, they only attract a benefit in kind charge based on 2% of the list price.” This means, for example, a £50,000 electric car will result in a £200 annual tax charge for a basic rate taxpayer, or £400 for a higher rate taxpayer. Further, if the business leases the car, those costs can be claimed when calculating the business’ taxable trading profits - and, says Wright: “If the business buys the car outright, the full purchase cost can be claimed in the year of purchase, as long as this is before 31 March, 2025.”

Salary sacrifice pension contributions are another tax-efficient option for Wright. He says: “If an employee gives up part of their gross salary, the employer can pay that amount into a pension scheme on the employee’s behalf, saving tax for the employee and NIC for both the employee and the employer.”

Finally, there’s the ‘trivial benefits’

rule, where rewards valued at up to £50 each can be provided tax-free to employees as long as they are not a reward for services and are not cash or cash-equivalent vouchers. Wright warns that directors are generally limited to £300 of trivial benefits per tax year.

The long term

Last for Wright is thinking about an exit strategy for those looking to sell up. This, he says, is because a Capital Gains Tax (CGT) charge is likely to apply, with rates of up to 20% on the growth in the business value. However, he says: “If you structure your business so it qualifies for Business Asset Disposal Relief, you could access a 10% CGT rate on up to £1m of capital gains.”

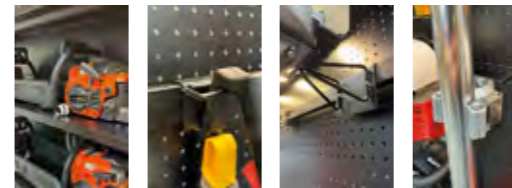
And then there’s Inheritance Tax (IHT). As Wright outlines, a trading business can often qualify for 100% relief from IHT thanks to Business Property Relief (BPR), which can provide a huge tax saving if the business is to be passed on. But, he warns, those that don’t structure their business carefully may miss out.

Summary

Tax is an obligation on us all, but it doesn’t, as an old HMRC advert notes, need to be taxing. The key is good advice from a regulated professional, and not following a course of action just because it’s tax-efficient.



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Products

COMMERCIAL

Agility out front

Kubota expand mower range

Kubota is broadening its FC mower range by introducing the FC3-221E, which they describe as a smaller, agile and adaptable centre-collect machine suitable for various applications, including residential gardens, schools, recreation areas and large-scale sports facilities.

The new 2WD mower benefits from a seating position that provides operators with full visibility of the mower deck. In addition to the ergonomic design, it comes equipped with a digital instrument display that provides real-time access to vital operating information.



Kubota say the mounting and positioning of the mower deck are meticulously crafted to follow the contours of the ground. The front-mounted deck configuration further adds to the performance, by generating optimal air pressure beneath the housing.

This approach guarantees a smoother cut, and facilitates the seamless flow of grass cuttings to the collector turbine, which lies at the heart of the machine's functionality. The manufacturer says this patented design element significantly reduces the distance travelled by the cut grass, enabling rapid and efficient grass collection.

Additionally, the FC3-221E features a 600-litre grass collector, meaning operators can cover significant areas before it requires emptying.

The 22hp machine is powered by Kubota's D902 engine, which drives the hydrostatic transmission and hydraulic system. This is paired with hydraulic power steering, a soft-grip steering wheel and steering knob.

Enhanced by a deluxe padded suspension seat, adjustable armrests and a high backrest, all tasks can be comfortably managed, say Kubota.

The front mower decks are equipped with two pairs of blades per rotor. Available in 1.12m and 1.26m-wide deck variants, the unit has the option to attach either a flail mower, a snow blade, or even a vacuum hose.

Maintenance access is also prioritised. By lifting the high-tip collector and the operator platform, access to the engine compartment becomes easily reachable.

AGRICULTURAL



Six new front loaders launched

Claas introduce new generation

Claas has introduced a new generation of front loaders, suitable for use with its Axos and Arion tractor ranges.

The new range features six models from the FL40C to the FL140, with lift capacities from 940kg to 2,490kg and lift heights from 3.50m to 4.50m. They feature a new three-section design, in which the pivot point mechanism has been lowered by 20cm, improving operator visibility over the frame and attachment.

For protection, all the hoses are routed through the frame. As an option, Automatic Bucket Return to the horizontal loading position is available, as are LED lights.

COMMERCIAL



Milwaukee looking to increase share

In OPE market in 2024

Milwaukee Tool has announced its intention to increase its market share in the outdoor power equipment (OPE) sector in 2024, saying they will offer more battery-powered solutions for gardening, landscaping and horticulture professionals.

The company has said they are set to heighten their position in the market with both new and updated releases of its cordless products.

Rhys Adams, national sales manager OPE at Milwaukee Tool UK, said, "Our mission in 2024 is to

ensure our expansive range for cordless equipment proves its value to professionals in the OPE sector by providing a one-stop-shop for the solutions they need.

"To help increase our share of the OPE market, we're bringing a variety of new products, as well as enhancements to our existing product ranges, to help ensure users have the right solutions to complete the task at hand with ease and efficiency when compared to more traditional alternatives - something that has always been at the top of our agenda."

The company says that among the tools hitting the market this year is the dual-battery self-propelled lawnmower, which features a 46cm steel deck and blade design and utilises their M18 Fuel battery technology.

Also utilising the same battery platform is Milwaukee's first dual-battery backpack blower, featuring a high-contrast consistent blowing force of 20.5 N across the entire battery discharge. The blower will be available later this year, and can hold up to four M18 Fuel batteries for extended runtime, as well as a padded back pad and padded adjustable straps for comfort.

AGRICULTURAL



The latest Horsch Leeb PT and VT self-propelled sprayers feature an all-new cab that the manufacturer says offers significantly higher levels of operator comfort.

Featuring quieter, more spacious and more intuitively-designed controls that have been specifically tailored to crop care, the new cab

Crop care cab changes cause comfort

Improved Horsch Leeb PT and VT self-propelled sprayers

creates a productive environment that allows operators to work more effectively.

Based on the latest Claas cab, the state-of-the-art cabin features an A-column terminal as standard and new Leeb-designed armrest and joystick control systems specific for crop care applications. Category IV filtration is fitted as standard, and pneumatic four-point cabin suspension is available as an option.

The new Leeb VT was the first

sprayer to feature the new cab. It combines variable track adjustment with the performance of a Leeb PT self-propelled sprayer. The flexible track adjustment is suitable for mixed crop farms and contractors requiring varying row widths between 1.8m and 2.4m, assisting with stability in the field and manoeuvrability on the road.

Leeb VT features a 5000 or 6000-litre tank, with a 230hp and 300hp Stage 5-compliant engine, respectively.

COMMERCIAL



Replacement models brush up

Two new AP System battery-powered units from STIHL

STIHL has launched two new AP System battery-powered brushcutters, specifically designed for professionals to tackle large areas of tough grass.

Replacing the FSA 90 model, the new FSA 120 and FSA 120 R boast a 40% increase in power says the manufacturer. The FSA 120 is available with a bike handle or loop handle (R) to best suit customer requirements.

Due to the utilisation of the same gearbox used in STIHL petrol tools, the new brushcutters are compatible with a wide range of cutting attachments, including AutoCut, PolyCut, DuroCut and TrimCut cutting heads, as well as metal grass blades for greater versatility and longer working times.

The FSA 120 offers flexibility with two-speed settings and a variable trigger, enabling users to adapt to different cutting requirements. Not only do both brushcutter models feature an ECO mode that reduces RPM to maximise working time, but they also automatically adapt their speed (in level 2) for optimum performance. With line head RPM at 7,800 and metal blade RPM at 9,700, STIHL say professional users can trust in consistent, efficient results.

Other features include a tool-free adjustable loop handle (FSA 120 R), as well as an adjustable harness hook that allows users to move the attachment points along the shaft.

The two units can be used with the AP 300 S Lithium-Ion battery, which offers up to 100 minutes of working time on a single charge when used with a metal cutting blade.

DOMESTIC

Supreme new offerings

Three new corded models from Webb



New for 2024 from Webb is the Supreme Rear Roller range of electric corded lawnmowers.

Available in three model types with a selection of cutting widths, the latest range, say the manufacturer, are designed to achieve a professional stripe lawn finish, with extra cable length for convenience, at an affordable price.

For small to medium-sized lawns, the WEER33RR harnesses 1200W of electric power with a 33cm cutting width and rear roller. Featuring a 30-litre easy-fit collection bag, it comes with a 12m cable.

For slightly larger gardens, the WEER37RR features a 1600W motor and 37cm cutting width and rear roller. Designed to keep disruption to a minimum, this model includes a 40-litre easy-fit collection bag and 15m cable.

To tackle larger lawns, the WEER40RR features an 1800W electric motor with a 40cm cutting width and rear roller. This model features a 45-litre collection box and an 18m cable.

Available with up to six cutting heights from 20-75mm (depending on the model), each lawnmower features a lightweight and ergonomic design for easy use and storage.

All Webb Supreme Electric Lawnmowers with rear rollers come with a three-year warranty, and a full range of spares – including blades and collection bags – are held in stock.

UTILITY VEHICLES

Toro enter new market

With first ever passenger vehicle, the Vista

Toro is entering a new market with its first ever range of passenger vehicles, the Vista range.

Jon Cole, divisional business manager at Reesink Turfcare, said: "With the unveiling of the Vista, there's now a dedicated transport option from Toro. It's designed for comfort and work, and made to move everyone and everything, with the quality customers would expect from Toro in a passenger vehicle."

A sturdy frame design stems from what the company describes as decades of success with Workman

utility vehicles, and is specifically designed to carry passengers and cargo. It's paired with spacious seating for four, six or eight passengers, ample storage, cargo-enabled fold-down rear seats, independent suspension, and an ergonomic design to ensure a comfortable ride and plenty of legroom.

There are several accessories available, including an optional canopy for weather protection, a folding windscreen, and even a lightweight cargo bed for luggage.



Coming with two HyperCell batteries and Toro's proprietary lithium-ion battery technology, the company says no special charging station is needed for the vehicle. The battery-powered model comes equipped with an on-board 900W smart charger - a charging solution that gives the capability to plug into any standard electrical socket.

The vehicles are brought to the UK by distributor Reesink.

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AGRICULTURAL



MF catch a new film binding

Updated its RB round baler series

Massey Ferguson has updated its RB round baler series for 2024 to include a quicker tailgate, film binding on its variable-chamber Protec balers, and new options for loading net or film rolls onto the baler.

The manufacturer says the new high-speed tailgate increases output by up to 6%, allowing an extra four bales per hour to be produced. It is included as standard on all Xtra and Protec models.

MF's RB V Protec balers can now be fitted with film binding, which follows the option on fixed-chamber Protec models last year. As part of this, machines with film binding are fitted as standard with the Rapid Reload system, which allows three rolls to be

positioned on a rotating frame near the binding area. When one roll is finished, the operator rotates the frame from the side of the machine to use the next full roll, without needing to lift a new roll into place. This means that changeovers can take minutes, helping to increase baler output, with three rolls providing most users with a full day of baling. Contractors using the Rapid Reload system can store two film rolls and one net roll in the rotator, depending on their customer's requirement.

The company's Easy Load System (net tying), Comfort Load and new Eco Load are options for loading rolls onto the baler. Comfort Load uses a sliding tray to lift rolls and present them to the

Rapid Reload system at the correct angle, which also helps prevent damage. Eco Load allows users to manually lift rolls up to the binding area without the use of the tray.

For 2024, the auto tailgate function, integrated bale weighing system, and the HayBoss moisture meter are three features that can now be ordered individually on new machines, without the requirement to select the option as part of a larger specification package.

New foldable pick-up guide wheels are available in both manual and hydraulic versions, making it quicker to switch between road and field.

In the cab, a new Bale Control Pro terminal replaces the E-Link Pro.

Where have all the people gone?



Our anonymous columnist, THE SPROCKET, considers the frustrations of recruiting into the land-based engineering sector.

Perhaps recruitment is too serious a subject to be treated frivolously in a Sprocket article, but it is one that I have spent many years working with and around, and one that is becoming an even more serious issue for our industry.

More and more, we hear that one of the dealer's biggest concerns is recruitment for both large and small businesses.

I use the words land-based Engineering as a generic term to describe our industry as a whole, covering agricultural dealerships, garden machinery and groundcare dealers and manufacturers. We seem to lack the unity of being able to describe what we do in simple terms, which causes us to be missed in the modern world of Internet searches.

Years of trying to find an all-encompassing title for us to compete in recruitment has come down to this title. Tractors, lawnmowers, outdoor power doesn't cut it. Find out what young people or newcomers to the industry research to find a job with us, and you will be 50% there with any recruitment campaign.

The traditional pool of potential technicians for the land-based engineering sector has been among farming families, but the mechanisation of farming, and the huge reduction of people numbers in this industry, means that source has nearly dried up. There is also no question that, on first impressions, the land-based

engineering sector is not that attractive to newcomers or young people, and only those that come from backgrounds related to the sector will begin to understand what opportunities actually exist.

All this means it is harder to recruit potential technicians – and parts people, in particular – from a non-existent traditional generic pool. So, dealers find themselves relying on what they can do locally - advertise, social media, word-of-mouth, family and friends, local education establishments, local schools, and poaching from other dealers. Anyone with a mechanical background is fair game. We hear of people leaving the armed services considering careers in land-based engineering, but is this a potential new resource, or just a trickle of interest?

The larger brand companies in land-based engineering have their own recruitment and training programs, which make it a bit easier for their dealer networks to recruit and train newcomers through apprenticeship schemes. I have always admired the effort that the larger agricultural machinery manufacturers put into apprentice programs. John Deere have a fabulous scheme, and invest heavily in this area of their business across the globe. More recently, Claas worked hard to bring their apprenticeship academy into play. AGCO have their own programs, as do Kubota and others in the industry. This may be seen as self-serving, but, in the

grander scheme of things, these companies provide a huge input into the training of technicians in the industry, who may move around once qualified. The 'seed corn of the future,' as one John Deere dealer was quoted as saying some years ago.

Individual dealers may well have a handful of apprentices over the years, and those that understand how this works will doubtless stick with the program even though there are losses on the way. There are gains, though, and stories abound of young apprentices reaching the top positions in dealerships – and even starting their own businesses. Don't give up on recruiting apprentices just because you have had a bad experience. At least one in three who enter industry through this route will come good.

Rising costs

As the problem of recruitment worsens, the costs will inevitably go up. Salaries, employment packages, retention costs and general benefits will all rise. This all begs the question: 'Will dealers on already tight margins be able to sustain their businesses?' There must be an investment for any business in sustained recruitment and training and apprenticeship schemes. A way needs to be found to make these roles more attractive to those that are not familiar with the industry.

With changes in working practices as a result of Covid – and with demand outstripping supply in the

labour market – we find the tail wagging the dog, and the upper hand is with the candidate, not the employer. Candidates are generally much more active and savvy than they used to be, with lots of choices – and they may be more particular about what they are looking for and what they want. This means anyone recruiting needs to be more professional about it, and present their company and packages in a clear and attractive manner. They also need to know what the modern youngster or potential candidate is expecting from their business, and what career opportunities are available. Educate

yourselves before interviewing, and give some thought to a modern-day employee and what they may need from you. It isn't the same as it was when you were a young person starting out.

The quote shown is a gem from a hardened professional, and says a lot:

Don't be frightened by investing in an apprentice or a trainee. Make it a part of your longer-term strategy, and accept the cost of it as a longer-term investment in the future of your business. Some may not work out, but if you don't try, the future may be bleaker than you think. If you need help, check out Government websites for apprenticeships, or contact one of the industry trade associations (BAGMA, IAgRE or the AEA). And try your local college, as well – they may have suitable candidates at some point in time.

Not just about cash

Bear in mind it is not always about money when it comes to hiring. Yes, you must get them interested in the first place, but recruitment and retention is about packages and the wellbeing of the individuals in your business. It can be more beneficial to all to provide things like flexible hours, overtime, company perks, clothing, PPE and a good working environment, as well as ongoing training. A clear

and sensible health and safety policy will show candidates you are serious about your business and the welfare of your employees.

Some years ago, I talked to the MD of a large agricultural dealership, with around 40 apprentices on its books across a number of branches. I asked him what his secret was. He told me

“If you think it's expensive to hire a professional, wait until you hire an amateur”

Red Adair, American oil well firefighter

that, at least once a week, he made a point of talking to each apprentice personally, to make sure they were happy in their jobs. They were provided with what they needed for their roles in the business, and involved in the daily running of the business. They had regular assessments and coaching, as required. The company's retention rate and success rate with their apprentice programme was high.

As an industry, we should not claim to be unique, but can claim to be different with some fabulous career opportunities for young people and those looking to change their working lives. This applies to men and women, and the girls and boys leaving education. The land-based engineering sector offers careers in technical areas, parts departments, sales, administration, IT, transport and logistics, and anything you can attach to a modern dealer.

The use of modern technology is a cornerstone of the industry, and should be sold to potential candidates – robotics, GPS systems, field mapping, autonomous machinery, drone technology, 3D printing, IT systems ... Dealers may not appreciate how advanced the

industry is, and this may not be made clear to potential candidates. Yes, of course we help to cut the grass and plough fields, and the age-old basics are still a part of the job, as well as the need to look after customers. Don't undersell yourselves and be proud of what you do. Pass this pride onto any potential newcomers. Use

your own enthusiasm and experience to get the people you want in your business. Let's face it, if the land-based engineering dealer network was not there, an awful lot of what we consider to be important in our green spaces and our gardens and fields would not be there, either.

Help is available

Where can you look for help, and where can potential candidates find out about apprenticeships in the land-based engineering sector? There is a website and supporting documentation to help potential candidates and employers learn more about what the industry has to offer in terms of careers and apprenticeships called 'We are Landbased Engineering' (www.wearelandbased.engineering), developed by BAGMA, IAgRE and the AEA – who make up the Landbased Engineering Training and Education Committee.

The site is specifically designed to be attractive to younger people, and to provide straightforward information for all about careers in the land-based engineering sector. Its content will be helpful to dealers who are currently recruiting. Dealers should use the site to help potential candidates understand the industry, and to help with their own recruitment information.

There are a number of websites covering apprenticeships. A good one for potential candidates is www.gov.uk/become-apprentice, which provides government information on how it all works.

What's on?

Status of the events correct at the time of going to press, but we advise confirming with organisers' websites and social media channels.

MAY 2024

North Somerset Show www.nsas.org.uk	6	BBC Gardeners' World Live - Birmingham NEC www.bbcgardenersworldlive.com	13/16
Nottinghamshire County Show www.nottinghamshirecountyshow.com	11	Three Counties Show, Malvern www.royalthreecounties.co.uk	14/16
Balmoral Show, Belfast www.balmoralshow.co.uk	15/18	spoga+gafa 2024, Cologne www.spogagafa.com	16/18
Hadleigh Show www.hadleighshow.co.uk	18	Royal Cheshire County Show www.royalcheshireshow.org	18/19
Smallholding & Countryside Festival, Royal Welsh Showground www.rwas.wales/smallholding-and-countryside-festival	18/19	Lincolnshire Show www.lincolnsireshow.co.uk	19/20
Chelsea Flower Show www.rhs.org.uk/shows-events/rhs-chelsea-flower-show	21/25	Royal Highland Show, Edinburgh www.royalhighlandshow.org	20/23
The Commercial Vehicle Show, Birmingham NEC www.cvshow.com	23/25	Groundswell 2024, Lannock Manor Farm, Hertfordshire www.groundswellag.com	26/27

JULY 2024

Shropshire County Agricultural Show, West Midlands Showground www.shropshirecountysshow.com	25	Hampton Court Palace Flower Show www.rhs.org.uk/shows-events/rhs-hampton-court-palace-flower-show	2-7
Northumberland County Show www.northcountysshow.co.uk	25	Kent County Show www.kentshowground.co.uk	5-7
Suffolk County Show www.suffolkshow.co.uk	29/30	Great Yorkshire Show www.greatyorkshireshow.co.uk	9-12
Staffordshire County Show www.staffscountyshowground.co.uk/staffordshire-county-show	29/30	Norfolk Garden Show, Norfolk Showground www.norfolkgardenshow.co.uk	12-14
Royal Bath & West Show www.bathandwest.com/royal-bath-and-west-show	30-1/06	Royal Isle of Wight County Show www.iwcountysshow.co.uk	13-14
Royal Cornwall Show www.royalcornwallshow.org	6-8	Driffield Show www.driffieldshowground.co.uk	17
South of England Show www.seas.org.uk/south-of-england-show	7-9	RHS Flower Show - Tatton Park www.rhs.org.uk/shows-events/rhs-flower-show-tatton-park	17-21
Cereals 2024, Bygrave Woods at Newnham Farm www.cerealsevent.co.uk	11/12	Royal Welsh Show www.rwas.wales/royal-welsh	22-25
		Launceston Agricultural Show www.launcestonshow.co.uk	25

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