

Extreme Factors

Glacier Snow Management shakes up its market with precision ice control and efficiencies

BY CHERYL HIGLEY | EDITOR

Twelve years ago, Don Nelson was a beekeeper in Moorhead, MN, suffering through a 112-in. snow season and seeing parking lots that he knew he could service better. Today, as president of Glacier Snow Management, he has the Moorhead-Fargo, ND, market buzzing with techniques and services that are progressive for his market.

“I jumped in the year after the big snow with a pickup and skid steer I used to move beehives,” Nelson says. “I started with small accounts and paid a lot of attention to detail.”

Nelson is the face of the company, handling sales and customer outreach: “I’m the guy who gets the accounts, stays in touch with the clients.” But he has brought in key people with other specialties, which allows him to focus on the personal side of the business. Co-owners Dave Torgerson is vice president and the company’s financial expert, and Jeff Fuchs is secretary and brings operations and mechanical expertise to the

snow-only operation. In the off-season, Torgerson is a farmer; Fuchs and Nelson operate a dust control company.

According to Nelson, Glacier has been able to grow by taking a smarter approach to snow and ice management. Located in a “do it yourself” market that still primarily uses sand and salt to battle the elements, Glacier has stepped out of the box—introducing clients to liquid and pretreated ice melt products and bringing in owner-operators to help shoulder the workload and equipment overhead.

“I am not afraid to be an industry leader in our market,” Nelson explains. “We are very educated in what we do, and we are very protective of our clients and how we service them. Making these changes has allowed us to become more efficient and make better use of our clients’ money—and they appreciate that.”

Sharing the burden

Glacier’s commercial clientele runs the gamut from little gas stations to hospitals to big box stores. A key reason why



The Glacier Snow Management team is led by (front, left to right) owners Dave Torgerson, Don Nelson and Jeff Fuchs. Among their team members are (back, left to right) Darin Vetter, Troy Skunberg, Chris Wear and Jena Korbel.

the company is able to service its clients is its reliable team of owner-operators who, during the winter, work only for Glacier. Many of the owner-operators are off-season excavators, construction workers and farmers who understand the importance of efficiency, know how to operate the big equipment and are not afraid of the long hours.

“We wanted to grow, but couldn’t do it alone because we were limited by how much equipment we wanted to carry,” Nelson says. “These guys have as much vested interest in our success as we do. To us, we are one big company and everyone carries the same philosophy.”



Smarter approach to salt

Having reliable owner-operators operating more than 50 pieces of heavy equipment in the field is only one part of Glacier's equation for success.

"A lot of people up here are still 'old school' in their approach, but we're finding more and more customers want an alternative," Nelson says. "You have to put yourself in the shoes of the clients, understand their needs and concerns. You have to be cost-effective in this market, so we're willing to offer things other snow providers don't."

Nelson said it only took a few disasters (a big ice storm and a blizzard) to

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Glacier Snow Management's Difference Makers

- 1 LEAVE A LASTING IMPRESSION.** "I tell our drivers to treat every push like it's their last one of the season. We want the lots to look great every time," says Don Nelson, president. "There are some people we won't take on as clients because they have a higher tolerance for snow. We want people to drive by our sites and know 'That's a Glacier lot!'"
- 2 EVERY CLIENT CAN BE SATISFIED—YOU JUST HAVE TO KNOW HOW.** "It's not the same for every client," says Nelson. "You have to listen to clients and find out what they need."
- 3 LOYALTY IS PRICELESS.** "Everyone wants to service the big box stores, but the little restaurant-size lots are just as important," Nelson says. "Their word of mouth advertising is like gold."

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force an evolutionary change in how the company tackled snow and ice. Glacier turned to box plows on loaders to manage the snow, but the biggest change came when it revolutionized the way the company—and its clients—thought about ice control. Glacier's forward-thinking approach to ice management has since become a key differentiator.

The company started anti-icing and

pretreating salt with corn-based magnesium chloride to maximize its use in extreme temperatures. Glacier is jumping into brine-making next year, and is considering a transition to mostly liquid applications. Before changing Glacier's ice control approach, Nelson says it was important that he educate himself on how to use the products better—and that the company paid close attention to application rates and spreader calibra-

Taking it to the extreme

Located in an area of the United States that faces extreme cold (the low on Jan. 2 was -33°F) and wind that can create almost unimaginable drifts, Glacier Snow Management's Don Nelson has had to adapt the company's business model to deal with the brutal conditions:

WINDS OF CHANGE: "We can get a dusting of snow or get 18 inches. Snow will be wet and heavy in the spring and fluffy in the winter—we have to be ready to attack what comes our way. Drifts are a huge problem. We might get 3 inches of snow, but because of the wide-open spaces, we'll get 4-foot drifts. It's not unusual to have 15- to 20-foot drifts across the doors."

IMPACT ON CREWS AND EQUIPMENT: "Negative 20 degrees is hard on the equipment—but it is very dangerous for the crews. Depending on the timing of the storm and our clients' needs, sometimes we're able to wait out the bitter cold and still meet our level of service."

BALANCING REALITY WITH CONTRACT DEMANDS: "A lot of our clients are zero-tolerance clients, but they're a little more tolerant because of the extreme temperatures when bare concrete simply is not realistic. For the most part, we work on hourly rates. We can try for zero tolerance in the worst conditions, but you have to balance that level of service with how much clients they want to spend and be mindful of it. Sometimes they're willing to pull back a little on service. Seasonal contracts—they expect it to be clean regardless."





▲ Glacier Snow Management has invested heavily to become a market leader in salt management. ► Drifts are a common challenge for Glacier given the area's flat terrain and windy conditions.

tion. He stresses the importance of educating clients on the science of salt and why his approach makes better sense.

“(Our approach to salt) has changed



our company,” he says. “We can show our clients what we’re using, how much we’re using and how much better it is than the traditional method used in

our market. The stores have been appreciative because they no longer have the cleanup costs associated with sand getting dragged in from the parking lot. Less mess and cleaner lots have made the salt an easy sell.”

Looking ahead

As Glacier looks to expand its reach, Nelson understands the challenges that come with moving into new markets. But he is confident the company is prepared for what lies ahead.

“We have surrounded ourselves with good, loyal crews, and we have a good business model. Our focus is always on delivering efficiencies and cost savings to our customers. That will never change,” Nelson says. **SB**

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