

LET IT SNOW!

Story and photos by Therese Dunphey



For more than 30 years, Macedonia, Ohio-based Reliable Snow Plowing Specialists Inc. has served the commercial snow removal market. The company services 450 commercial properties from its headquarters and 50 satellite locations throughout the northern half of the state. In an intensely competitive business, its success is based upon a simple premise: living up to its name.

“What’s important is taking care of customers and getting the results that you promised for each customer,” says Norm Detrick, the company’s president. “It’s all about customer service.”

In addition to their contractual obligations, Detrick says he believes the company has a moral obligation to protect the people walking in and out of customers’ businesses. “There are over a million lives that we impact with each storm,” he adds. “We take it seriously.”

In turn, Reliable Snow Plowing depends on a fleet that can deliver uptime, as well as a dealer who can deliver on its

maintenance needs and a manufacturer who ensures a high-quality product and parts availability.

Building partnerships

To promptly service their 450 commercial customers, Reliable deploys a varied equipment fleet that is evolving through a key partnership with RECO Equipment Inc., its area Hitachi dealer. Over the past several years, Detrick has worked with Dave Ferroni, RECO’s territory sales manager, to determine how Hitachi loaders could best serve the company’s snowplowing needs.

"The partnership started off small and grew as the trust grew," Detrick says. It began with short-term rentals to meet temporary needs created by large-scale storms. Last winter, Reliable expanded its rental program using more than a dozen Hitachi loaders in various sizes from late October until early April. As it evaluated the loaders, Reliable also eyed its relationship with RECO and Hitachi to see if it was a good fit.

"Dave circled the wagons and got everyone talking about our unique needs," Detrick says. Through a series of meetings, Ferroni shared his vision of what the partnership could look like in the future. "Their work culture is remarkable," Ferroni says. "They all understand that the goal of the company is total customer satisfaction."

Expanding the fleet

Ultimately, Detrick opted to lease 21 ZW80 loaders in the first phase of a multiyear, multiphase fleet expansion. Two factors drew him to the model: its dependability and its ability to work in cold temperatures. "It's a cold-blooded machine; that really appeals to us," he

explains. "We knew this size works really well for us. We call the ZW80 the perfect snow machine!"

The 12,220-pound ZW80 boasts 8,280 pounds of breakout force, with access to extra torque via its manually locking differential — perfect for lifting wet, heavy snow. The center-pin area has robust support structures as well as large pins and bearings. This ensures a steady bucket lift. The fastest machine in its class, the ZW80 can also zip around a jobsite with a top speed of 21.1 mph.

Building a matched fleet creates a strategic advantage for the business for several reasons, Detrick says. Most importantly, equipment operators can get into any one of the loaders and get straight to work. In a market where the operator hops into the cab at 2 or 3 a.m., intuitive operations are particularly important for optimizing safety. The fully enclosed cab is sound insulated to provide a quiet, distraction-free environment, and floor-to-ceiling tinted glass windows — with a pillarless design — provide the clear lines of sight needed for plowing during snow squalls.



Norm Detrick, president of Reliable Snow Plowing Inc., monitors storm conditions in the company's command center.

Expanding the fleet with ZW80s also streamlines maintenance. "The learning curve that goes into supporting and maintaining a fleet is drawn down when you're dealing with a matched fleet," Detrick adds. From a serviceability perspective, it also minimizes stocking requirements. He and Ferroni methodically reviewed which components should be kept in stock. Both Reliable Snow Plowing and RECO stock a backup unit while RECO maintains inventory of necessary maintenance items to ensure that Reliable can always meet its customers' needs.

"We went through this and took a real-world approach," Detrick says. "Hitachi delivered a turnkey solution and have supported it with multiple branches and multiple mechanics in the field. That was a strategic advantage they brought to the field."

Mixing high- and low-tech strategies

Meeting customer needs demands strong communication among Reliable Snow Plowing's multiple locations and staff. That communication includes a mix of high-tech and low-tech strategies modeled after first responders such as police and fire departments. For example, most communication between snow fighters is via two-way radios and pagers. "People laugh at us, but you know what? The doggone things work," Detrick says. In fact, pagers allow him to contact one



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employee or 800 within seconds. He appreciates that efficiency.

From a high-tech perspective, snowplows are equipped with plow cams that allow the business to track weather conditions in real time. At the company's command center, a grid-like display showcases the view from 150 cameras placed across Reliable Snow Plowing's entire market. This helps the company track lake effect storms — which can change at a moment's notice — as they move through the area. "It gives you a situational awareness of how a storm is coming in and what the conditions are on pavement," Detrick says, explaining that no two lake effect storms are the same.

This storm tracking ability is so valuable that it led to an innovative partnership between Reliable Snow Plowing and Channel 19, northeast Ohio's CBS affiliate. Through that alliance, the television station has access to more than two dozen of Reliable's snowplow cameras. "It gives them a tremendous amount of shot diversity and a different way to tell the weather story," Detrick explains. "The flip side is they give us an open door to their meteorologist."

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When a storm front moves into the area, it's not unusual for Detrick to talk to the meteorologist throughout the event and get up-to-the-minute pinpoint forecasts. These forecasts help the company provide the best possible service to its customers by allowing it to move plow trucks and sidewalk shovellers to the areas of its market that most need them during each storm.

Planning for the future

Through strategic partnerships and savvy business practices, Reliable Snow Plowing enjoys its reputation as the premiere service provider in its market and intends to stay on top. The second and third phases of fleet expansion will each add another 21 ZW80s to the fleet over the coming years.

"This product is very, very dependable," Detrick says. "It's not only a high-quality product that works well, but also at a price point that is favorable. The value makes a lot of sense."

"Going forward, we have the solutions to build this into something great," Ferroni adds. "It's a win-win partnership for Reliable Snow Plowing, RECO Equipment and Hitachi wheel loaders." ■

Reliable Snow Plowing Specialists Inc. is located at 8020 Highland Pointe Parkway, Macedonia, Ohio. For more information, call 330-467-7273 or visit reliablesnowplowing.net.

Snow Fighters!

Innovations in training and retention

To ensure its employees have the operational and equipment knowledge needed to be highly effective, Reliable Snow Plowing created an internal training program, Snow Fighter University. "Our core processes are very different from the rest of the industry," says Norm Detrick, president of Reliable Snow Plowing Specialists Inc. "It's a very refined system."

The program combines classroom and hands-on training. Interactive digital training modules are followed by proficiency exams. Trainees run loaders and trucks in the yard well before the snow season begins, and a mentor driver is paired with each trainee. The mentor works with the trainee until they reach proficiency and begin operating independently.

“**In these difficult times of COVID, paying the next day helps minimize economic stress for our team members.**”

Reliable exceeds industry employee retention rates by offering rapid compensation. The company recently shifted from weekly pay, which was already faster than industry standards, to next-day pay. They invested approximately \$1 million in hardware and software, including custom programming, to exceed market expectations for compensation. "In this labor market, it's a differentiator," Detrick says. "To make that work, it takes a tremendous infrastructure of technology and systems to pay 800 snow fighters the next day. In these difficult times of COVID, paying the next day helps minimize economic stress for our team members."