

**Who**

Equipment Service

Where

Hartford, Connecticut, USA

Challenge

Increase snowplow truck upfitting profits and generate repeat customer business

Solution

Work closely with key vendors, such as CPS, to reduce installation time and exceed customer expectations



Long-time snowplow truck upfitter returns to profitability by focusing on customers and best practices

Equipment Service finds that exceeding customer expectations and working closely with vendors to reduce installation time are two keys to generating repeat business.

For nearly 70 years, Equipment Service of Hartford, Connecticut, has provided snowplow truck upfitting and truck repair services for customers in Connecticut, western Massachusetts and parts of Rhode Island. For most of those decades, Equipment Service had the local market to themselves, and although profitability waxed and waned like the weather, it was generally a healthy business. Then, in the 1990s, a number of competitors sprang up that siphoned off business and left the company with often-negative numbers. Even the purchase of the company in 1999 by the truck manufacturer, Freightliner, didn't immediately turn the business around. By 2010, Equipment Service was upfitting only about 20 snowplow trucks a year and struggling to generate black ink on a consistent basis.

In 2011, Equipment Service hired Kevin Dinsmoor as the new Service Manager. In

a little over four years, Dinsmoor — an ASE master certified technician with 20 years of experience running a large independent truck and auto repair facility — and his team of 15 employees tripled the annual number of snowplow trucks upfits. Equipment Service's goal is to upfit 100 trucks each year.

Equipment Service and Dinsmoor accomplished the turnaround in trucks upfitted by focusing on exceeding customer expectations and developing best practices that begin with an order for a new snowplow truck and end when the finished product is delivered to the customer. Whether the best practice is fine-tuning internal or external communications or purchasing snow and ice control equipment from Certified Power Solutions (CPS), the goal of each practice is to build the best possible truck for each customer while increasing company profitability.



As a result, Dinsmoor and his team have generated repeat business that, in turn, continues to fuel Equipment Service's growth.

THE BUSINESS TODAY

"The core of our business is assembling snowplow trucks," said Dinsmoor. "Those account for about 80 percent of our business." Regular dump trucks account for 15 percent of Equipment Service's business and hook

lifts and roll offs amount to about five percent.

Equipment Service has a second shop that does truck repair, complete rebuilds and preventative maintenance.

"Weather plays a role in our business too. The large amount of snow that fell last year has helped to drive orders this year as cities and towns seek to update their snow removal fleets," said Dinsmoor.

Whether Equipment Service is upfitting a Freightliner, International, Mack or Peterbilt, the basic stock comes in as a rolling cab and chassis. While Freightliner is the most requested brand in the shop, customers will sometimes specify other brands or just leave the bid open. "Then, all the truck chassis manufacturers will bid based on the specifications.

A lot of towns try to keep their fleets the same for spares, maintenance and ease of doing business. It never makes sense to have six different brands of trucks in your fleet," said Dinsmoor.

FUELING THE GROWTH

Many factors have gone into Equipment Service's success over the past four years, but one overriding reason stands out. "We have

a keen sense of attention to the customer," said Dinsmoor. "We always focus on building a better truck rather than trying to increase profits by giving the customer a lower quality product. The result has been that after we build the first truck for a customer, the business just keeps coming back. A lot of times, the municipal jobs don't have a lot of margin in them, so our competitors will 'go cheap' everywhere they can. That doesn't generate repeat business for them, but repeat business is what is helping to fuel our growth."

BEST PRACTICES

Communication – "The most important thing is good communication among all the departments within your facility, letting everyone know what jobs are here and which ones are coming," said Dinsmoor. "That allows us to order all of the equipment and have it at the facility before the chassis arrives. That way, when the chassis arrives, we're not waiting for anything; all the materials are here. That factor alone can save 90 days. A lot of our competitors don't order any material until the chassis arrives and, as a result, the chassis sits outside for eight weeks."

Communication with vendors is also important. "One way we've improved efficiency is to have clear communication with the chassis supplier, and we'll communicate up front with them as to what we need on our chassis. For example, we can get snowplow lights prewired and trailing brakes wires already run in the truck. If you have that communication with your chassis supplier before the truck is built you can save yourself a lot of time. Otherwise, if a chassis shows up and there's a fuel tank right where you need to install a hydraulic valve, your productivity is destroyed."

Meetings – "I'm old school. I have two humongous white boards in my office and I keep everything on them so we can all view the boards and have discussions," Dinsmoor said. "The white boards make it easy to make changes on the fly. Every morning I get



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Kevin Dinsmoor, service manager,
Equipment Service, Hartford, Connecticut



The EZ Spread™ control system available from CPS is for basic spreading applications of granular and pre-wet materials and combines functionality with user-friendly operations. The system and its ease of installation make a significant contribution to Equipment Service's profitability.



Equipment Service installs the SpreadSmart Rx™ spreader control system on most of its snowplow trucks. The electronic control system from CPS helps fleet managers save money by regulating the rate of salt and other de-icing materials applied to road surfaces by snowplow trucks.

together with my parts people and update what we have and what came in. It only takes half an hour a day, but that's a big part of making the shop more efficient."

Partnering with snow and ice control products vendor

– Given that the profitability of upfitting a new snowplow truck is based on the cost of equipment installed and the labor time it takes to move a truck in and out of the shop — it takes Dinsmoor and his team 45 to 60 days to build a new snowplow truck; Equipment Service's competitors require 120 to 180 days — Equipment Service has called on different vendors for its snow and ice control products over the years. Since hiring Dinsmoor, Equipment Service has relied on CPS for 98 percent of its snow and ice control equipment. The other two percent is provided in-house by Equipment Service.

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Joe Brill, east-coast regional technical representative for CPS, confirms his open-door policy with Equipment Service. "Kevin and I call back and forth in the a.m. or p.m., and even though I live a couple hours away from Equipment Service, I've been on site many times to answer operation questions."

One of CPS' newest products has enabled Equipment Service to cut three hours off the time needed to upfit a snowplow truck. The PowerSmart™ is a centralized power and accessories wiring system. The compact circuit assembly panel fits between or under truck seats and provides a central power and connection point for switches, sensors and relay controlled devices. "The PowerSmart system is easy to install and helps my technicians tackle the challenge of working with a wide variation of chassis and equipment sets when building a new truck. The system also helps the technicians organize the power sources and wiring when installing electrical equipment on a truck," said Dinsmoor.

Equipment Service also helped CPS develop the PowerSmart. "We showed Certified Power what we were doing with our own junction panel that we worked up in the shop. Brill took that basic idea back to Minnesota and CPS transformed it into the new PowerSmart, and now we're putting it in every truck," said Dinsmoor.

Employee organization, training and retention

– Getting the hardware right is one side of the equation, but the other involves the employees who do the work. "Another one of our best practices is that we build all our trucks in teams of two technicians. We don't do an assembly line style. Some places do, but I think some things get lost in the shuffle on an assembly line. So we do teams of two and separate the jobs between in-cab electronics and all the iron on the chassis. Each team has one guy who is proficient in that side of it. So as they work together as a team, within two weeks' time, the body is married to the chassis and it's off to the paint shop."

Dinsmoor describes finding good employees as almost impossible, and once one is found, you have to hold on to them. "Most of the time we look for people with skills in welding because there is so much welding to do. And then we train them on the job for the rest



Kevin Dinsmoor (lower left), service manager, Equipment Service, and staff.

of the skills. Unfortunately, there is no school for the type of work we do, because it's such a mixed batch of skills. Equipment Service has done an excellent job of retaining good workers by offering annual salary increases and employee benefits."

"For example, we offer a 10 percent 401K match, paid vacation and medical insurance. We provide technicians with up-to-date equipment and let them get

out at 3:30 p.m. every day. They like that. I try to keep a relaxed environment and I'm really not hard on employees because the job is hard enough. I encourage them all to be free thinkers, so it's a pretty good place to work. With teams of two, the techs take more ownership of the product. It's great to hear them say 'that's my truck right there.' They're proud of what leaves here," said Dinsmoor.

Devil is in the detailing – In the end, the commitment to exceeding customer expectations comes down to the first impression the customer gets when the truck

is delivered. "One thing Equipment Service does is that once we're done with the truck, we send it out to get detailed top to bottom, so when the dealer gets the truck, it's spotless. Some upfitters leave pieces of electric wire on the floor, footprints, and dirt and grime everywhere. Our snowplow trucks are spotless and ready for the road when they are delivered to the customer. It costs us a little more money, but I think it saves us more than it costs us."

Advice to shop managers – "To be better at their job, workers all need to learn electronics and hydraulics. In my experience, everybody falls short in these areas, and it causes a lot of inefficiencies or rework. All shop workers can cut, weld and grind and do the basic things, but if they can learn electrical and hydraulic functions, they would all definitely excel. The upper-level upfitters are the guys who know hydraulics and electronics," said Dinsmoor.

Dinsmoor's focus on exceeding customer expectations and best practices have laid the groundwork for Equipment Service's return to profitability. Equipment Service has been in business for nearly 70 years, and if Dinsmoor has anything to say about it, they will be in business for 70 more.

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