

The Wind Blows in a **BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY**

New Holland tractors remove snow in the winter, landscape yards in the summer.



When the wind blows and snow falls, most people never see the people hired to clear their driveways. Most of the work takes place at night or when customers are off to work. But the people who clear the snow, like Christian Lafontaine in St-Hubert, Quebec, are sure to hear from their customers if the snow removal isn't done right.

Lafontaine has been clearing snow for 25 years, starting from scratch with a pick-up truck and blade in 1993, so he figures he's done more right than wrong over the years. Located just south of Montreal, he now has 2,000 residential and 100 commercial clients. He operates



Christian Lafontaine started his snow clearing and landscape business 25 years ago.

a fleet of 18 New Holland snowblower-equipped tractors, and seven New Holland Construction front-end loaders.

His brother-in-law taught him the tricks of the trade. He combines his winter activity with a landscaping business specializing in garden walls and back-yard patios. "It's a vocation," Lafontaine says. "And the two businesses help to keep jobs going year-round."

DEMANDS GROW

Customers are more demanding these days and they push Lafontaine's team to do a good job. That's why he likes his fleet of 4- and 6-cylinder T5 and T6 Series tractors. "Reliable, comfortable and easy to use," he says.

Continued on page 8



QUEBEC SNOW REMOVAL



Lafontaine's fleet of 18 New Holland tractors are kept ready to roll when the snow starts to fly. A GPS tracker and iPad in each tractor lets him know where the equipment is located. Each customer is notified when the job is completed by a text with a photo of the clean driveway.

Just as important is how the New Holland tractors handle the driveways that slope down into the basement garages common in many suburban homes. Lafontaine says that the New Holland tractors have a solid transmission and brakes that allow his drivers to back down the slope and stop with the blower just inches from the garage door. “My guys are not afraid to go down the slopes,” he says.

But Lafontaine has also refined the peripheral technology to help out as well.

He adds calcium to the tires and 1,500 pounds of weights on the front to give extra traction when there's freezing rain, a frequent occurrence in the region during the winter months.

Lafontaine also adds some high-tech extras for better management and improved customer service. Each tractor has an iPad with a GPS tracker. He can see the exact minute which tractor was in which driveway. Drivers also take a picture to prove the driveway was cleaned

and send a text or email to the customer to notify them the job was done.

DRIVERS NEEDED

Despite the technological improvements, the whole operation still needs a manager to keep things coordinated and someone to deal with problems. Lafontaine usually works through the night during snowstorms, attached to his smartphone in his office. If he's lucky, he can catch a couple of hours' sleep in the bed he has tucked away in the corner.

In addition, the machinery still needs a driver. Even with the high-tech state of modern tractors, Lafontaine says that finding good labor is a continuous challenge. Having spare drivers around to relieve those who have worked through the night is often a luxury.

Besides having to know how to operate the equipment, the drivers must familiarize themselves with a route through streets of identical-looking houses—in the dark—along with the peculiarities of each driveway.

“The best customer is one that's always on vacation,” jokes Lafontaine, which is a reflection on a very high-stress business when the snowflakes start to fall.



QUEBEC SNOW REMOVAL



update the older tractors, one of which is 20 years old, and continue his “bit by bit” expansion that he has pursued over the years. “The big guys are always getting bigger,” he says. “It’s hard to stay small.”

Lafontaine is keeping pace by leasing more of his equipment than in the past, which he says is easier on cash flow and gives him the option of buy-back at the end if the tractor is a keeper. The loaders do double duty in the summertime moving earth and loading dump trucks.

Despite the large presence of machinery in his operation, Lafontaine considers himself to be a people person who can get the best out of others.

“I was shy when I was young,” he explains. “My business helped me to blossom as a person.”

So, what does he do when not he’s not orchestrating snow removal around the town?

“My home is my paradise,” he replies. Not surprisingly he built a beautiful landscaped patio around his backyard pool where he puts his feet up after the long summer days working on other people’s landscapes. He also manages to take a week’s vacation in April and October, wedged in between the two seasons.



WHO: Christian Lafontaine

WHERE: St-Hubert, Quebec

NEW HOLLAND EQUIPMENT: T5 and 6 Series tractors and New Holland Construction front-end loaders

DEALER: Inotrac, St-Hyacinthe, Quebec

Below: Michel Hamel, Yannic Labelle and Christian Lafontaine are ready to tackle the snow.

As with many small businesses, it’s a family affair, and although he’s still a young entrepreneur at 48 years old, Lafontaine has his eye on the future. His girlfriend, Laurence, handles the accounting, and his eldest son, Dominik, is now 23 years old and working alongside him on the snow clearing and landscaping crews. He also has twin 13-year-old daughters and a 10-year-old son.

“The kids don’t yet know what they want to do but it’s nice to have my son around,” he says as he reflects on his own path into the business. “The wind brought me here to this job; but I made it what it is on my own.”

KEEPING UP ON EQUIPMENT

It’s still a business and Lafontaine is always thinking about the next steps. Even though some of his guys love their older New Holland tractors, the combination of winter snowblowing and moving earth in the summer takes its toll. He has plans to

