



TAKING ON TAHOE

As tolerance for snow falls,
Alpine Smith raises the bar

BY CHERYL HIGLEY // EDITOR IN CHIEF

Lake Tahoe, which lies across the border of California and Nevada, is a year-round playground for outdoor enthusiasts. Surrounded by the Sierra Nevada Mountains, in winter it transforms into a skier's paradise. A 200-inch snowfall is common at lake level, with higher elevations often seeing triple that or more.

Darin Smith, CSP, grew up north of the lake in Truckee, CA, and now lives in South Lake Tahoe. Like the other locals, he is accustomed to the snow. But in 1995 he says he found himself "tired of winter." So he found a new way to play in the snow. Smith purchased a truck and a plow and went to work, only to quickly realize he had made a mistake.

"I did it for one season, and came to realize it wasn't what I wanted. It was too reactionary and I didn't feel in control," he says.

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ABOUT ALPINE SMITH

Location: South Lake Tahoe

Founded: 2006

Clientele: Residential/Commercial

Employees: 8 year-round, up to 50 in winter



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ALPINE SMITH FLEET SPRY // Page 19**

A NEW APPROACH

He stepped back, re-evaluated and in 2006 Smith came at the South Tahoe market with an approach that could handle the heavy, wet “Sierra Cement” snow that is typical in the Lake Tahoe region.

It is also one that had been tried and tested north of the lake. He turned to hydrostatic municipal tractors outfitted with high-powered front-mounted snowblowers. Armed with the right equipment and tightly systemized routing, Alpine Smith began tackling South Tahoe snow one driveway at a time.

Today, he serves over 960 customers, 95% of which are single-family residential homes.

“I had no idea the appetite for our service would be so strong. Three-quarters of our customers don’t reside in Lake Tahoe. Those are our bread-and-butter clients,” he says, adding that he also works with local property managers that maintain second homes in their rental pools. “These clients view our service as a utility. The last thing they want after driving six hours in a snowstorm to get here is an impassable driveway. They just want to go to bed and go skiing the next day.”

Residential customers pay an upfront seasonal rate and are slotted into



one of 20 dedicated routes that have been meticulously plotted. Each route has a specific starting and ending point with a preset, consistent pattern that optimizes traffic and flow patterns. While storm timing and road access can have an impact, Smith says his proactive approach helps mitigate those things he can’t control.

Snow removal operations begin on residential routes once per

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➔ NEW GAME PLAN After learning that tackling snow with a truck and plow wasn’t going to cut it in a Lake Tahoe winter, Darin Smith, CSP, adopted a business model familiar in parts of Canada and North Lake Tahoe. Municipal-type tractors with high-powered front-mounted snowblowers. Residential homes are Alpine Smith’s bread-and-butter clientele.

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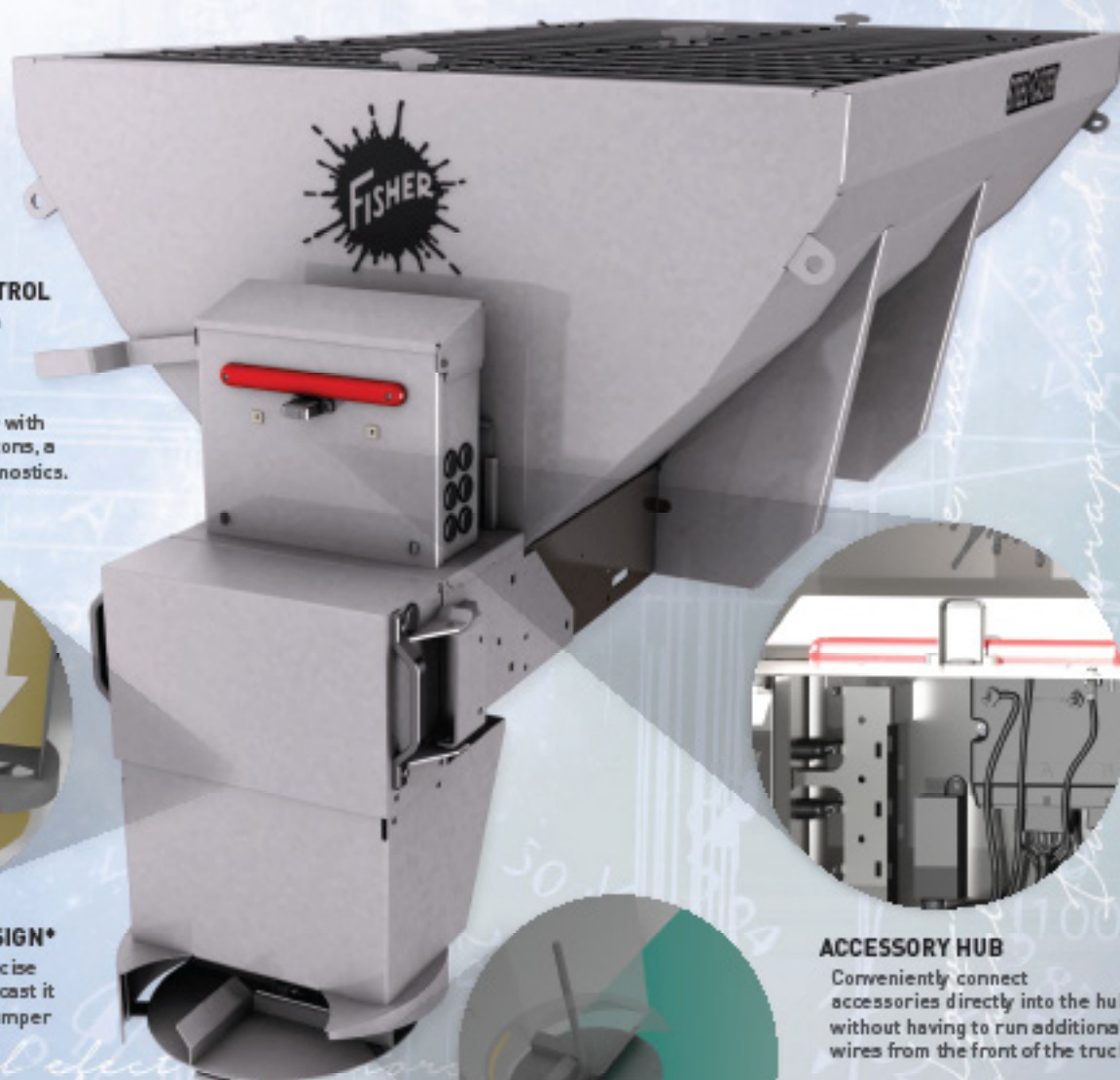
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ICE MANAGEMENT A TOUGH SELL IN TAHOE

Tolerance for snow and ice may be decreasing in Alpine Smith's South Lake Tahoe market, but demand for ice management services has been slower to follow suit. Alpine Smith introduced ice melt to the market four years ago and now has a dedicated route with a truck and a 4-yard spreader.

"This market is so far behind, and we're really just getting into it," says Darin Smith, CSP, noting that he has about 12 clients who request ice management services, which are billed by application.

Why the reluctance? He cites three reasons in particular that ice management isn't a desired service:

The sun is a natural deicer. Despite its proximity to the mountains, the air is quite dry in Lake Tahoe. The sun shines about 75% of the year and is higher and more intense, especially in the spring. It's not uncommon for 6 inches of snow to fall by noon and for it to melt quickly, leaving no need for plowing or ice management. While there can be some refreeze, Smith says it is more

common for the snow just to evaporate.

Sticker shock. In an area accustomed to snow and ice, Smith says most clients don't want to pay for it. "Customers are not accustomed to the costs associated with ice management," he says. "It's on us as professionals not to become greedy and to be responsible with what we're putting down. We've had people try it only to drop it due to costs."

Environmental regulations. According to Smith, Lake Tahoe is known as the highest regulated environment in the United States. The lake is 99.7% pure and the EPA and local officials want to make sure these pristine waters are well cared for. Private businesses are required to implement best management practices to prevent runoff, and hauling by private contractors is prohibited so all snow must be managed on the property on which it falls. "It puts a lot of responsibility on the snow provider to not disturb the natural environment. The constraints are huge and we have to be very careful with applications so people don't get antsy."

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day when snowfall accumulation reaches four to six inches. Operations generally begin around 2 or 3 a.m. After each major snowstorm, Alpine Smith follows up with post-storm cleanup.

"Our residential model operates much like a newspaper route. We assign dedicated equipment and an operator to the route, and they clear the accounts in the same order each day. There is a great deal of complexity within our system, but it's automatic. We have a solid plan so that our customers don't have to be concerned about it. They know it'll be taken care of," he says.

Filling in with commercial

When Smith first started out, he turned down all commercial work to focus solely on residential. His plan was to refer any commercial work to the typical excavating contractors who perform snow services on the side since they already had the larger equipment. Those contractors would then reciprocate, sending residential business his way.

"I thought we'd have this great alliance of providers. But in year three, I realized I was referring all this commercial work and getting very little back in return. I found that they would clear the commercial sites and then backdrag all their residential sites on the way home."

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Smith's solution? If you can't beat them, join them — and then beat them. He started buying loaders and amassing

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COMMERCIAL: Initially a residential-only company, Alpine Smith expanded services to care for a select group of commercial clients.

COVER STORY

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commercial properties. Commercial clients now make up only 6% of his portfolio but account for 60% of the revenue.

“Commercial property managers have the same hunger for good service as residential clients,” he says. “As the tolerance levels for snow have started to decline, we’ve been able to raise the bar with our professional approach.”

Changing times

Since starting Alpine Smith 11 years ago, Smith says he has started to see a change in mindset with regard to snow. The long-time locals still have a general tolerance and understand it is part of living in Lake Tahoe. The snow service clientele doesn’t have the same patience,

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EQUIPMENT DEALERSHIP KEEPS ALPINE SMITH FLEET SPRY

➔ Alpine Smith owner Darin Smith, CSP, spends a lot of time in tractors — but it's rarely to clear snow. Instead, it's to learn as much about them as possible so not only can he make the best purchases for his snow company but also so he can stock his equipment dealership.

Smith sells professional snow removal equipment to contractors and municipalities primarily across a wide swath of Western states. His lineup includes Honda snowblowers and generators, Multihog multi-purpose tractors and Antonio Carraro tractors for snow and agriculture. With the right attachments, the tractors can be used effectively in non-snow uses and the selling season is keeping Smith quite busy.

"My role is evolving and morphing

more into sales. Because the snow market is so spread out, dedicated dealers are hard to find," he says.

One benefit to having an equipment dealership is being able to manage the life cycle of his equipment and having a built in sales avenue.

"We have chosen to make the investment to own all of our own equipment, but not everyone who walks into our dealership can afford a new machine," he says. "We are able to reach back into our inventory and sell those tractors and then backfill with new equipment. It's a unique situation and we're very fortunate to be able to have built these relationships with the manufacturers."



WELL-EQUIPPED: Alpine Smith is a dealer for Multihog and Antonio Carraro tractors. These versatile machines can be outfitted with several attachments, such as sweepers, front-mounted snowblowers and plows for multi-season use.



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COVER STORY

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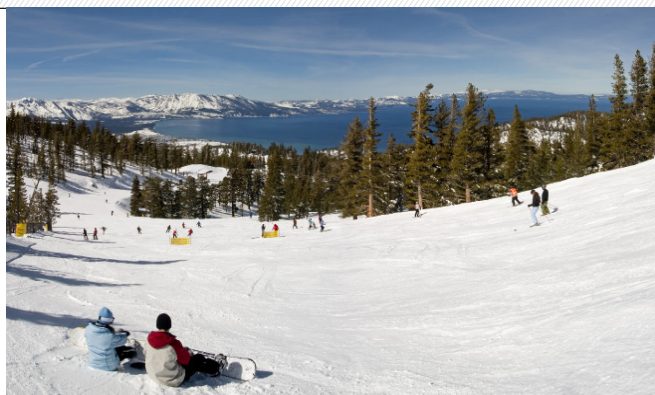
Smith says, despite four out of the last five winters being below average in terms of snowfall.

"The property owners from outside the area are bringing their ideals, professionalism and sophistications to the market. They have higher expectations," he says, adding that California's litigious slip and fall environment has greatly increased the level of service requirements and lessened the tolerance for ice and snow.

Even the municipalities are jumping on board as they strive to provide more pedestrian friendly infrastructures and year-round access to outdoor recreation.



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WINTER WONDERLAND: Locals and tourists flock to the Lake Tahoe slopes but tolerance for snow and ice is starting to slip in the region.

"Four years ago you would never see a sidewalk cleared unless there was a tremendous amount of snow, if then. Now the city is requiring they be cleared. With the focus on recreation, they want bike trails and pedestrian pathways maintained so they can be used all year long," he says.

Smith says the shift in thinking is opening up new avenues for revenue growth. While the municipalities want to be pedestrian/bike-friendly they don't have the infrastructure and equipment to maintain that level of service.

"It's a great opportunity for snow providers. We just bid on six

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miles of bike trail that historically would never have been put out for bid. Their growth isn't keeping pace so they are contracting out the excess work," he says.

Taking it to the next level

Smith's approach to professional snow removal in South Lake Tahoe has set Alpine Smith apart. Historically the town was served by "good, hardworking people" that lacked a certain level of organization and professionalism. Alpine Smith, he says, is the only service provider in South Lake Tahoe that has a dedicated facility, firm business policies, contracts and a support system behind the operations. They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and others have taken notice of Smith's success and begun to emulate his business model.

"There have been a lot of coat-tail followers. Everyone has the same website and says the same thing. The next challenge is for us to continue to stay on top, above the imitators by continuing to deliver an unparalleled commitment to our customers." ❄

Cheryl Higley is editor in chief of Snow Business magazine. Contact her at cheryl@sima.org.

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