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### Backyards and beyond

By Tony Flynn Staff writer

MOUNT VERNON — When homeowners let the old garden area get out of control until the weeds have grown high enough to hide a dog, chances are they will grab a phone book to rent a brush cutter.

While equipment stores are an excellent resource when it comes to finding a remedy for such problems, the average person may not know that these businesses are really much more than a rental store, said Jordan Mellich, regional manager for Birch Equipment Rentals for the last 12 years.

For example, besides providing personal service to homeowners and small businesses, such as contractors and landscaping companies, Birch also supplies the refineries with tools for their shutdowns.

"It's not very cost-effective for refineries to own a large inventory of tools and store them for their annual shutdowns," said Mellich. Yet when the time comes for the 300 or so out-of-state workers hired to refit, clean and repair the facility to punch the time clock, all the parts and tools they will need to do the job have to be within reach. That's where a service Birch has created for its industrial customers comes into play.

Mellich explained that when the refineries at March Point schedule a shutdown, his company immediately begins planning for the event, which can last up to six weeks. He coordinates with the refineries to provide customized



Birch Equipment manager Jordan Mellich has just about anything a contractor might need to rent available through his store.

Photo by Tony Flynn

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vans, filled with specific tools for every job the subs will need.

In addition, Birch has devised a computer tracking system for logging tools in and out to workers.

"This does two things," said Mellich, "First, we use a bar code to record each item as it leaves and comes back. This helps prevent theft of equipment. Second, the computer system helps us provide the company with a utilization report so they can keep track of what is being used and where it is being used." Industrial clients make up about 15 percent of Birch's customer base, but Mellich said it the fastest-growing segment of the company.

### **Growing segment**

Landscape and small contractors account for about 70 percent of Birch's business, making up the real backbone of the rental support industry, said Mellich.

It's split more evenly between contractors and homeowners for Mike Urban, owner of Consumer Rental Center in Mount Vernon.

While a good chunk of the equipment that Urban rents out or services is dedicated to the weekend yard warrior, he said contractors are coming to rely heavily upon the rental suppliers in the area, especially when it comes to gas-powered items, such as generators and lawn maintenance equipment. "It's becoming more and more popular for contractors to rent something instead of buying it, especially gas-powered tools, because they get to use it and give it back for us to keep in working shape," said Urban.

So prolific is that niche of the market that Urban has hired someone full-time who is dedicated solely to repairing and maintaining gas equipment for contractors.

Still, demand is cyclical at times. Urban says renting equipment is popular with small-sized contractors just starting out. Eventually, most begin to purchase their own ditch diggers and nail guns, but Urban has noticed that once they become really successful there comes a point where they grow so much they can't keep up with demand. They hire employees and then end up renting equipment all over again. "It comes in waves," he said.

One quirk that Urban sees as incentive for contractors to rent instead of owning

is fuel additives. Unless gas equipment is fired up on a regular basis, within six to eight weeks the gas sitting in the bowls found on two-stroke engines turns to a jelly and will gum up the equipment.

"It works for us either way, though, because we do repairs too," he said.

## Local connections

Birch Equipment has been serving the north Puget Sound region since 1972. It has grown to three branches in Anacortes, Mount Vernon and Bellingham, plus a newly opened branch in Sitka, Alaska. Interestingly, in what has traditionally been a male-dominated industry, Birch is a 100 percent woman- and locally-owned company.

Consumer Rental Center has been in business since it was founded in 1969 by Marv Suthers. Mike's father, Peter, bought the business in 1974 and Mike took ownership four years ago.

Both companies provide homeowners and contractors full sales, repair, and maintenance service, including everything from weed eaters to generators to pumps.

Consumer Rentals does go one step further by providing party accessories for weddings, retirements, reunions and other such events, which, until a short while ago, did not involve contractors. That's changed, though, said Urban.

"Believe it or not we have found a way to offer our party services to contractors. It's becoming more and more popular for guys pouring concrete in bad weather to rent one of our tents so they can keep working and keep the rain off their slab."



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