Utility Arborist Newsline

MAR/APR 2017
VOLUME 8
NUMBER 2

INSIDE

MAST PHOTO: ©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/ SUSAN HABERMEHL

Eight Questions You Should Be Asking of Your Data in 2017

By Chris Kelly, Vice President, Clearion

FOCUS ON TECHNOLOGY

Hint: This has nothing to do with better sleep and exercise, but it can make your (work) life better, healthier, and easier this year and beyond.

Ask any of your colleagues about their resolutions for the new year and you'll undoubtedly hear them chime in about going to the gym more frequently, eating better, sleeping more, and of course, getting a better handle on their vegetation management (VM) programs. I know—it's like we're reading your minds. We hear it all the time. "If only I had more hours in the day to jump on the the elliptical," or "I wish I had the time and tools to run some great vegetation management reports, but there are so many other competing priorities."

Knowing that you want better program management and actually knowing where to begin are two different things. But it's a new year, so let's start! How? By actively outlining some of the key questions that haunt us late at night. With advanced analytics, single-click reports, and real-time dashboards that allow us to focus on the macro so we can attend to the micro, we can get better sleep on a daily basis—and wake up in time for the gym. ►

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CLEARION

PHOTO COURTESY OF CLEARION

In no particular order, the following are eight key questions you should be asking of your data:

1. What are my highest priorities this year?

You can't do it all every year, and sometimes standard, multi-year cycles don't give you optimal results. Some maintenance areas are riskier than others when it comes to outages and reliability. Some cost more than others, involve more crew hours, or require a different type of work crew. This year, rank and prioritize your work based on historical performance, detailed trim and work history, field observations, and other projection factors. Then, optimize your annual work plan to minimize risk and maximize your budget and use this year's data to build a better model for next year. Your VM plan will be healthier than ever.

2. How am I tracking against my budget?

Overbudgeting and underperforming is not how you want to spend your year! Sure, it sounds like a no-brainer, but we've all been there. With real-time progress tracking of actual spending against the budget across all work areas (e.g., lines, feeders, subs, regions), there should be no surprises. And with historical data to support your decision-making, developing a reasonable, multi-year forecast helps to ensure you're never overspending the budget again. It's time to manage 2017 effectively and successfully plan 2018 and beyond.

3. How well am I managing my customers' VM requests?

In the world focused on customer service, responding to your customers' requests within a timely fashion is critical. It's not exactly a news flash; however, most companies don't know their average response and resolution times to reactive work. Yet, that part should be easy. When tickets are closed and the details are captured electronically in the field and transmitted to corporate, not only do your customer service representatives have the job statuses available when needed, but they also have the ability to track the response speed and aging of your customer requests (i.e., how many are near due or past due), allowing you to prioritize immediately and plan effectively going forward.

4. Which of my contractors are performing most effectively?

Sure, we all have our anecdotal contractor preferences. Yet, many of our software clients have had eye-opening experiences when they began comparing contractors across a range of metrics (e.g., cost per mile, progress per week, response time, results of quality audits). When key performance indicators (KPIs) are put into place and tracked, you gain relevant insights to help manage and improve performance, including the ability to use contractor-specific, performance-based incentives. And by drilling down to crew or general foreman levels, you can provide meaningful and actionable information to your contractors. It's a win-win for your partnership.

5. How well am I managing my herbicide program?

In today's eco-conscious environment, "spray, baby, spray" is not our rallying cry. Not only are we sensitive to consumer environmental concerns, we share their concerns for sustainability and right-of-way (ROW) stewardship. We operate in a world where applying the right mix at the right volume is critical not only for environmental sustainability, but also for lowering our operating costs. As such, we should be running detailed cost—and efficacy—analysis across all herbicide activities to manage our investments. And we should be conducting year-after-year comparisons. Are my cycle lengths increasing? Is my active ingredient usage going down? Is my mix changing? Is my inventory sufficient? Important for tracking goals, we should also be capturing and reporting on ROW stewardship progress (e.g., the number of acres converted for sustainability, pollinator habitats created or enhanced). It's a public relations dream come true!

Bonus: For those of you who are truly on the cutting edge, what about adding weather data automatically to your reports so you can analyze the correlation between weather patterns and efficacy? Imagine the short- and long-term impact of daily, weather-related prioritization decisions.

Okay, we're in the home stretch.

6. Where are my fast-growth trees that require trimming multiple times per year?

"Would you look at him? He's growing so quickly!" Those words of praise to a toddler become more of a cautionary tale when applied to trees growing under power lines! To readily abide by internal, state, or federal clearing standards, employing a short-cycle trim dashboard can be a lifesaver. When you locate your entire inventory on a map and color code it by status, you can easily summarize the quantities assigned, scheduled, completed, or past due and prioritize work and budgets accordingly.

7. Which of our landowners consent to (or refuse) our work?

More and more companies are seeking land owner consent prior to vegetation treatments. It's far worse to trim without permission than to do it after the customer has explicitly refused a request. Good documentation is essential for eliminating this scenario, and having electronic landowner signatures can keep you out of hot water and may even help you sleep better. Clearing notification and consent information on a per-parcel basis keeps your contractors working on the right tasks and can also help ensure compliance and plan more effectively going forward.

What's more, accurate, timely, and available information about refusals can help you act to negotiate with landowners or find alternative treatments before the crews have moved on to other areas of your system. A customer refusal dashboard, including real-time updates from the field, can immediately highlight work locations with refusals or work restrictions, allowing you to escalate when necessary. When your permission field agents capture the location, contact information, notes, status of customer refusals, dashboards, and maps showing open refusals and restrictions become your task lists for remediation, mitigation, or negotiation.

8. How do I make desktop planning more accurate?

Yes, this answer is so predictable: remote sensing. Incorporating LiDAR, imagery, and hyperspectral-derived data into work planning, work auditing, and ROW features (e.g., access roads, riparian areas, environmental structures and concerns, cultural resources) leads to accurate planning with fewer trips to the field. Furthermore, with desktop work planning, field trips can be more efficient—and you and your team will have more time to spend in the gym!

The problem with dashboards, reporting, and analytics, as I'm sure you know, isn't really about "a lack of time." It's about having the right tools at your fingertips to get the answers that you need easily and quickly. This year, make *that* your priority and you'll have a healthier, happier, easier, more productive 2017.