

If You Build It, Will They Come? Keeping Your Grapple Saw Busy



Many companies that have a grapple-saw crane have developed sales and marketing strategies based upon the use of their equipment and how it sets them apart from competitors in their market. Others have reduced crew size by bringing mechanized tree removal into their repertoire. All photos courtesy of the author.

By Steve Connally, CTSP

The versatility of the grapple-saw crane, also called a boom-mounted grapple saw, is advantageous to many tree-service professionals. The majority of these businesses have purchased and used the rig for their own operations. Others use a subcontractor. In this article, we'll look at how the owner of a grapple-saw crane can market his or her services and the role this equipment can play in a tree-services operation.

Many companies that have a grapple-saw crane have developed sales and marketing strategies based upon the use of their equipment and how it sets them apart from competitors in their market. Others

have replaced their struggles in finding qualified or interested employees by reducing crew size and bringing mechanized tree removal into their repertoire.

Additionally, many see the grapple-saw crane as a way to mitigate hazards associated with storm-damaged trees, dead trees and other potentially hazardous trees, including those struck with disease or pathogens such as emerald ash borer (EAB). Reducing exposure to potentially disastrous situations by keeping a climber out of the hazard trees seems prudent. Only the business owner or management team can know what the best equipment, resources, manpower and marketing strategies are for their own operation.

It's easy to "armchair" operations through social media. I do my very best to

avoid those threads or discussions. Despite my best intentions, sometimes it just sucks you in. I find the level of passion between the stick-crane folks and the knuckleboom proponents mildly amusing. There's always the contributor who says they could have the tree done in three picks with a 60-ton, whereas it may seem like it has taken longer with the grapple saw, and it probably has. There are so many circumstances that dictate the selection and use of equipment on a job site. How is it possible to determine if the 60-ton was a better option? Stick with me here. I'm trying to get those creative thoughts flowing so I can lead into the crux of the article. Remember this argument and the points to ponder. We'll come back to them.

I am contractor and owner of a grap-

ple-saw crane. Frequently, I'm asked about my business model. Other times comments are made that suggest being solely a subcontractor with a grapple-saw crane and having no employees is the dream situation. You just show up, do the work, collect the check and go home. How could it get any better? Totally stress free, right?

A common conversation starts with, "I'm thinking about going out on my own and just subcontracting. What do you think?" I can only answer based on my market and how I market myself.

This was all a huge roll of the dice for me. Having been a production climber for 20 years, I found myself looking for the company that best fit my opinion of what safe and professional tree work was all about. Along the way, I worked for quite a few companies and even owned one of my own a decade or two ago. The struggles with employees and finding reliable, trustworthy teammates was a headache I didn't want to endure. It seems you can sacrifice one of two things looking for that perfect company: You can compromise on safety and professionalism or you can work for a lesser salary. I wasn't interested in either avenue. So I took the gamble, and Adaptable Aerial Solutions, LLC, was born. It was born out of necessity and was a high-stakes financial gamble. Jonathan Ernst, an acquaintance and 45-year veteran arborist from Virginia, calls me the "Market Disruptor," something so far out of left field in my area that no one has even considered it.

To explain what I'm talking about, I need to point out how cranes are used in arboriculture in my area. There are eight large stick-crane rental companies where I operate. Knucklebooms are what the building-supply manufacturers use to deliver roofing shingles and plasterboard. When you consider using a crane for tree removal, the only option that comes to mind is a stick crane. This made the sell and the marketing extremely challenging to those whose entire plan is to pick big and go home early. Being able to market successfully to those operations was a challenge. I find my primary customer is a small operation with three or four employees and a modest amount of processing equipment. These companies are still able



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to pick big, but rarely go home early.

The time it takes to process those big picks with minimal manpower and equipment isn't any more efficient than using a grapple saw to strategically dismantle the tree into manageable pieces at a steady rate. The benefits are less time lost – as the operator on the 60-ton is waiting on the material to be processed and the set for the next pick – less fatigue on the ground crew and a decreased sense of needing to hurry, hurry, hurry. That feverish pace lends itself to shortcuts and safety compromises with the intent of saving time. The potential for accidents is higher.

I have been doing this for quite a while and have worked big crews and small. The pressure of production while the crane clock is ticking always increases the job-site anxiety. Don't get me wrong. Some small companies are awesome at processing big picks. Then again, some aren't. What I have found is that the 34 companies I subcontract to call me back over and over. These companies range from minimal startups to well-established, large operations. The key is how they use me.

The smaller companies, whether proficient or just getting established, use me to

complete a volume of work similar to that performed by larger crews. My bread and butter is the three-person crew. We are able to tackle large projects without overtasking the crew and manage the job at a pace comfortable to the crew size. It's also nice for the climber and crew who climb day in and day out – with two-person, long-brush drags – to get an easy day once in a while. We often take what would be multiple-day jobs with a three-person crew and reduce them to a one-day job.

Large companies use me for trees they don't want to put a climber in or jobs where it would be much more efficient just to use the grapple saw due to site conditions. It's not that they can't remove the hazard tree just like we've done for years, but now they have a choice. Why should they risk their employees? Many companies recognize the choice they have with the grapple-saw crane and bid accordingly for its addition to the production cost.

I have a new contractor I'm working for that is a nationwide operation. My regional sales contact with this contractor says his position is, "After contract climbing for 18 years, why should I put someone in a hazard tree when I have a choice not



"Large companies use me for trees they don't want to put a climber in or jobs where it would be much more efficient just to use the grapple saw due to site conditions," says the author.

to?" Seems prudent to me. I never understood the bosses I worked for in the past who were perfectly fine risking my life for a payout at the end of the day. There would be big money on those trees, but the crew

never saw a penny of it or heard a thank you – not every company I worked for, but many of them.

So back to the argument over tools on the job. Still here with me? There are jobs

I show up on where I tell the primary contractor they'd be better off with a stick crane. There are also many jobs I show up for where a stick crane wouldn't do or would be so inefficient with the crew size that the benefits of big picks would be a moot point.

In my mind, comparing the brute-force strength of the cable crane and the knuckleboom isn't a real comparison at all. It's like comparing a bulldozer to a grader. Sure, they both have blades. They both work on construction sites. They are tools, tools each contractor has to evaluate for best usage on the job site. It's funny really. I don't hear the same arguments between the full-size loader folks and the mini-loader users. Sure, a full-size loader can pick up more than a mini, so it must be better all the time, right?

So marketing to a professional community with new technology is a challenge. There are those who will never use me. There are those who only used me once and couldn't see past the size of the picks. There are also those who use me on every nasty tree I can access. Lastly, there are those who see I can increase their production efficiency based on their crew sizes and resources, reduce fatigue and, in short, give their people a break for the day.

I found the performance of the truck isn't enough to bring unsolicited interest. There has to be something more to the brand. Personally, I try to bring an element of education into every job site. It may be job-site setup, climbing techniques, safety operations, saw use or just being a watchful eye over the job site.

Sometimes tunnel vision occurs and people become task oriented. Standing on the deck of the crane is a great location to keep an eye on everything happening on the job site. When you've been around a while, you know when the chipper doesn't sound right, the saw chain sounds too loose or there's the car coming when you're dragging brush into the street with the mini. I try to bring the newest technology and tools that help decrease fatigue on the climber who's rigging picks and the ground crew. I believe my ultimate job is to make it all easier for them, more efficient and user friendly.

So, will this work for you in your market? I don't know. Only you know if there

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is a niche you can plug into. Make realistic scenarios to market. Understand you are an endurance runner competing against a power lifter at a fitness show. There are those who can't get past how big they are or how much weight they can lift. Others will appreciate the efficiency and the constant movement of material. Ultimately, if you present yourself in a way that shows how you can increase safety, production and efficiency, then you should be golden.

It's a struggle being solely a subcontractor. I never knock a job out of the park and make a ton of money. I do that for the primary contractor and, in turn, they use me more. I get paid what I invoice per hour. I guess that's the beauty of it. If it goes great and was an outstanding bid, I get paid. If it was an awful bid and the job barely breaks even, I get paid. We should, as subs, do everything in our power to help the bad bid never repeat itself through education and training. I have one particular company that brought their entire sales team out for an hour training on my rig. It benefited everyone. I got to meet the sales staff, and

they got to meet me and understand the truck – setup, breakdown, grade, footprint, limitations, etc.

In closing, ask yourself the following questions. Is there a niche? How can I best serve my potential customer base? What can I do to be proactive in my market and facilitate the acceptance of new technology? Where can I show my stuff, e.g., an ISA day of safety, Arbor Day volunteer day or other industry events, regional training sessions, show-and-tell appointments. What will set me apart from other crane rentals beyond just the technology? Are you a veteran climber? Is there a benefit to a climber operator?

Thanks for sticking with me. This information may not be for everyone, as many companies have a knuckleboom for their company use. If you are considering supplementing company income by subcontracting, I hope this will help. If you were looking for the technical nuts and bolts of grapple-saw operations, then I'm here to tell you I'm out there learning every day. There are better qualified individuals than

me to share that information. I've only got 1,800 hours and about 275 jobs under my belt. Far be it from me to tell anyone how to operate their truck. Every tree is different, and every situation dictates different procedures and techniques. I can only speak to what works for me.

To quote just about every equipment and business owner, "The struggle is real."

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This article was based on his presentation on the same subject at TCI EXPO 2019 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. To listen to an audio recording of that presentation, go to this page in the digital version of this issue of TCI Magazine online, under the Publications tab, and click here.



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