



Sweet Smell of Success

Adding 2D machine control to a compact track loader changes the game for Arizona-based excavation contractor



Mike Sweeter brings decades of expertise to the grading and excavation game, a skill that allows him to tackle projects with a minimal staff and a relatively small equipment fleet.

Company

Sweeter Excavating, Flagstaff, Arizona

Project

Rehabilitation of a commercial loading dock area in Flagstaff, Arizona

Topcon Products

2D-MC machine control for compact machines

Topcon Dealer

Branco Equipment, Phoenix, Arizona

"We don't need a whole lot of iron to do what we do: underground work, building pads, parking lots, etc.," he said. "Everything we do, however, involves establishing grade and, for the longest time, we'd been content doing things the traditional way – using stringline and a whole lot of hand work. In 2021, however, I started looking for ways to improve grade control using our compact track loader. I was referred to Rob Binder from Branco Equipment, the dealer that handles both Topcon equipment and the Level Best line for this area. After that call, everything changed."

According to Binder, after learning of Sweeter's projects and needs, his recommendation of a Topcon 2D machine control solution, used in conjunction with a Level Best box blade, was an easy one.

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"The whole thrust of Topcon 2D-MC is its ability to simplify the grading process, minimize grade checking and increase accuracy — perfect for what Mike does," he said. "And the system's affordability allows users like him, who typically would not invest in traditional machine control, the chance to experience its benefits."

With the 2D-MC solution, Mike or his son Chase can arrive onsite, gather points for existing grade, sit in the cab and design what's needed, then move right into grading. It allows them — or any contractor — to complete more projects, more accurately.

Sweeter recently put the solution to work correcting grade for a loading dock area and the benefits became immediately apparent.

"Over the years, the loading area had developed low spots that were creating drainage issues and would freeze, resulting in a safety hazard. So the entire area was slated for a major rehab. Because the project featured multiple slopes and grade accuracies were critical, it was perfect for the new grading system."

Sweeter said the 2D-MC's ability to maintain tight grade tolerances — generally within ¼" — is critical, particularly as material costs and availability continue to play a role in today's economic climate.



"Up here in Flagstaff, everything is 'shot rock,' so material like Class AB is much costlier," he said. "The same holds true for concrete, which is not just currently expensive, it is also in short supply. That makes maintaining a tight grade all the more important. A tenth of a foot low can be a lot of extra material. The accuracy of the system means there will be a uniform 9" of concrete put down — no more, no less, no surprises."

Sweeter's son, Chase, said he is glad to put the manual work behind them, citing the increases in efficiency.

"The new system removes the need for continually getting in and out of the machine for grade checking and, at the same time, eliminates any guesswork," he said. "I can get in the loader at the start of the day and not have to get out again until I want to, so productivity is definitely up."



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The senior Sweeter concurs, citing the range of benefits they've seen. "We can finish a pad much quicker with tighter tolerances and we've eliminated the risk of losing money to an incorrect grade," he said. "Consider that two or three men with stringline used to manually lay out grade and one man does it now with the machine. The grading process is probably 75% quicker than before.

"Just based on the increase in productivity and material savings, I'd say the system will pay for itself in our first year of use—maybe sooner," he added. "It's made that much of an impact on the operation. We can't imagine doing a job now without it."



A [full-length version](#) of this story is on the Topcon website.



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