

GE thinks it has found rich, untapped market

It's not going to make people forget about Chris Columbus or Tom Swift.

But General Electric says it has discovered a virgin materials handling market, and its Outdoor Power Equipment Div., in Scotia, N.Y. is sailing straight ahead on a nifty little electric-powered, combination forklift-maintenance dynamo called the I-5-Elec-Trak.

"It's a rugged, versatile and pollution-free power center," says division general manager Bruce Laumeister in describing the 1000-lb, battery-operated I-5 tractor.

"It meets all the current Federal safety standards (ANSI:B56.1 specifications; Factory Mutual Engineering Corp. Class E approval), and you can use it for a variety of material handling, maintenance and groundskeeping jobs."

Mr. Laumeister says he'll sell to heavy industrial users, but doesn't plan to overmatch his I-5 lightweight in the tough heavy-weight forklift competition. Where he does intend to operate, however, is in a potential multi-million dollar market that always was but which no one has bothered to crack.

"We see a big market in the under-one-ton lift vehicle for the small manufacturer," he submits, "like the guy who runs a die shop, needs to move 5 to 10 heavy dies a week, but can't justify buying a standard \$12,000 forklift."

GE marketing research has come up with about 300,000 of these potential users in light manufacturing alone. Parlayed with commercial customers—air-

ports, hospitals, universities and construction—for example, the GE general manager figures you're talking a \$100 million market in the next six years.

The Laumeister arithmetic is based on a 40 pct annual rake-off from the current \$250-million-a-year lawn and garden tractor market, which is now in the midst of a resurgence (IA, June 8, '72, p. 48) after a few years in the doldrums.

But, he qualifies for Iron Age, "You can figure \$100 million in six years depending who else gets into the market."

So far, no one else has, by Mr. Laumeister's count. Most of the competition, he says, is just getting into garden-tractor electrics, with only six models being put on the market last year.

At the 1000-lb lift-vehicle class, however, "the market is still wide open," the GE official maintains. And GE is getting there first and the fastest with its multi-purpose I-5 Elec-Trak.

Unveiled last week at the company's Scotia production center, the I-5 comes off like the second generation of the seven cordless Elec-Trak lawn and garden models that GE has been marketing here and abroad since it plunged into the garden-tractor business nearly three years ago.

The difference is in the half-dozen or so optional pieces of attachable equipment offered with

the basic tractor. Among the add-on units are three variable-sized telescope forklifts (up to 96 in. with a rated 750-lb lift capacity); a 40-in. front-end bucket loader, with a 500-lb fill capacity; and a bevy of attachments for clearing snow, vacuuming aisles and sweeping roadways.

Throw in a few extra grand and you can also come up with a tow-behind maintenance cart, a trash compactor and personnel carrier seating up to nine people.

"Versatility," summarizes Mr. Laumeister. "Safety certification is a big selling point, but our dealers also like it because it does so many different things."

The dealers, about 1500 of them, also like the price: \$2195 for the basic tractor. "The word is enthusiastic," says the GE general manager. "We've had dealer introductory meetings the last three weeks, and some of them are selling units now from photographs."

The economics get a little sticky the higher you go with the optional equipment—up to about \$6500 for everything but the trash compactor. Add that unit and you're touching \$10,000.

All of which doesn't bother Mr. Laumeister in the least. "It's still a helluva buy (for the small user) when you compare it with a \$12,000 forklift." ●

Carl J. Suchocki



A little imagination converts GE's I-5 Elec-Trak into a rolling workbench.