

The Greening of the Internet

by Meta Levin

The analog and the digital are harmonizing in the green industry in the form of websites, providing new tools to help landscape contractors attract, qualify and serve their customers.

"Now when people are searching they can find my company and reach me," says Dave Gean of D.R. Gean Landscape Company in Chicago, whose simple one-page website (www.geanlandscape.com) is about three years old.

In the analog world of landscape contracting, more and more green industry professionals like Gean say that a website is an integral part of doing business, just like a phone line, voice mail or a fax machine. Using everything from do-it-yourself online website building tools to sophisticated website designers, landscape contractors, and their suppliers, are finding the web lends credibility, as well as new possibilities, to their work.

"It's a tool that you have to have to be considered relevant," says Hursthouse, Inc. president Bob Hursthouse, who recently completely redesigned and revamped his company's website (hursthouse.com) to more accurately reflect the company's current focus. The work was part of an updated marketing plan.

Like Gean's, Hursthouse's website features the company name and logo, as well as contact information, including a live email link. But that is where the similarity ends. Gean's single page has one set of "before" and "after" photographs, and a simple list of the company's services. Hursthouse's allows visitors to navigate through a portfolio of 20 carefully-staged photographs taken by a professional photographer, and provides information about the company's philosophy, staff, awards and news, in addition to testimonials from clients. Content and categories were carefully thought out ahead of time, and text includes key words that help search engines find the site.

Whether simple or sophisticated, one of the keys to a successful website is to do what makes sense to you and your business.

Attracting and Qualifying Clients

Just as they shop for books from Amazon.com or research a drug on WebMD, an increasing number of people are looking online for landscape contractors. Thus, a well-designed website can help potential customers find your firm, and can serve as a quick way to begin the process of qualifying it.

"Our website is designed to pretty quickly convey what we do and don't do," says Phil Cleland, president of Chicago Specialty Gardens. "It's a great time saver. We've gotten a number of good projects through the website, and the clients are pretty realistic about the cost and what good work looks like."

The company completed a redesign (chicagogardens.com) last year, as part of a rebranding to drive home the way it has changed and evolved in recent years. The site includes a contact form that asks for information about the proposed project. "We want them to go through the process of filling out the form and determining if we are right for them."

Sharon Bretl-Marrin of Bret-Mar Landscape Management Group, Inc. agrees, often sending prospective customers to the website (bretmarlandscape.com) when they call. "I tell them to check us out," she says. Like many landscape contractors, most of Bret-Mar's clients come to them through word-of-mouth, but the website is a quick and easy way to show prospective customers the kind of work the company does. Although the site is only one year old, now that she has had an opportunity to live with it, Bretl-Marrin has a clear idea of what she does and doesn't like, and plans to redo it soon. In the meantime, it includes pictures of completed residential and commercial projects, contact and other information about the company.

Aimee Divis of Post & Picket, LLC, has found that her site (postandpicket.com) allows prospective clients to gain some level of comfort with the type and quality of the work the company does. Now very basic, it allows consumers to click on various categories of custom fencing to see

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examples of Post & Picket's work. Divis says she would like to update it to include more information about the business and what it does.

"Our website familiarizes people with the different ways that we can serve them," says Tom Klitzkie of Nature's Perspective Landscaping. "It gives visitors a sense of who we are." Like many landscape contractors, Nature's Perspective moved from glossy photographs to a CD portfolio and, finally, about four years ago, to a website (naturesperspective.com). Klitzkie emphasizes the convenience of a web presence. "People can look at it in their own homes at any time, not just when we are open," he says.

For Jane Dilworth of Jane Dilworth & Associates, the website (janedilworth.com) not only tells prospective customers what the company does, but introduces them to the more unusual projects with which she has particularly enjoyed being a part, such as healing

and children's gardens. "It shows them different options, and helps people visualize what can be done," she says.

Unlike some of the other websites, Dilworth has opted to use sound on her home page, so that viewers are treated to birds and running water for a short time on entering the site. In addition to the usual categories from which to choose, Dilworth has a password protected client support section, allowing her to provide information to current patrons.

What to Include

Websites should be easy to use. While it is tempting to dump a lot of information on the site, practicality dictates that businesses must make choices about what is most important. All of the landscape contractor sites include at least one picture of a completed project. This is, after all, often a potential customer's first introduction to the firm — and everyone wants to put his or her best foot forward. The process of decid-

ing which and how many pictures, can be a long and involved one, as can determining what else to include.

"The danger of a website is that you only have so much space and time to tell a story," says Hursthouse. When he went through the process of redesigning his website, he spent time trying to understand how people used the web. "I realized that there are different personalities to sites," he says. "Some are content light and image heavy, and some are the other way around. We tried to strike a comfortable balance." He also made a conscious decision to limit the number of pictures to 20, so that people could go through them fairly quickly — he estimates it takes about 46 seconds.

In doing research before talking with the designer he had hired, Hursthouse looked outside of the green industry, visiting websites from a variety of products and services that might attract the same kinds of clients that he does. These included Disney (Disney.go.com), BMW (bmw.com) and Nordstrom ([12](http://nord-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

strom.com). "This is my competition," he explains. "I'm competing with vacation properties in Florida, new luxury cars, and other high-end commodities. We need to be every bit as good an experience as they are getting there."

At Nature's Perspective Landscaping, two-way communication was considered important to include in the redesigned website. In addition to a live email link, current clients can find customer satisfaction surveys in downloadable PDF files, reference lists, and even fall cleanup request forms. Included are seven care guides for everything from caring for new plants, sod or newly seeded lawns, to trouble shooting low-voltage lighting systems. "This is another way to interact with our current and potential customers," says Rick Prinz, Nature's Perspective's business manager and the person in charge of the redesign.

In evaluating her current website, Bretl-Marrin says she wants to make sure that anything she does in the future

is elegant, simple and easy to navigate. She also wants it to serve as an educational tool that will allow customers to know that she is keeping abreast of new trends and techniques in the industry. "What we have now is adequate, but there are so many things out there that could be done," she says. The company has hired a marketing company to help. As an initial step, the web designer has asked her to list three websites that she likes and three that she doesn't like, and to explain why. This will help her focus on what is important to include on her own company's website.

Most of the landscape contractors involved their key personnel in the design process. For instance, Hursthouse's core marketing team reviewed work in progress and made suggestions during regular weekly planning meetings during the six-month website development process. Once a rough version was ready, they all tested it, noting what did and did not work.

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By the time it went live on Oct. 1, 2006, nearly the entire staff had been involved in testing and proofreading the content.

Do It Yourself or Outsource

There are many options for designing a website, from online templates, to software, to professional web designers. What works depends on the financial and other resources available to each company. Often firms get their feet wet by starting with low-cost options such as templates or do-it-yourself software, only to opt for hiring professional designers the second time around.

Gean's site is the product of a barter arrangement. He already had a logo and traded the website design for some landscape work. The result has been simple, but serviceable and he says he has gotten business through the site.

Occasionally, there is an in-house designer with the necessary skills. Such was the case with Nature's Perspective's first website, which was designed by a former employee. It has been updated twice using outside website designers, the first a green industry web designer, and the latest by the person who maintains the company's computer systems. The work has been a collaborative process, with much of the concept and initial design sketches done in house. "When we have updates, we will sit down with the person implementing them and work it out," says Prinz.

Dilworth, too, has an in-house designer. Project manager Rick Stillson is the creative force behind the website. "He has vast computer knowledge," says Dilworth. Pleased with the results, she says she is unlikely to outsource future updates.

Using FrontPage, Microsoft's website design software, Divis did her design work by herself, although she found that it was a learning process and she did need some outside advice.

Cleland and Hursthouse are on the other end of the spectrum. Both operate larger firms and are willing and able to commit more money to hire profession-

al website designers. Their new websites are part of a total marketing and branding process that includes coordination with logos, business cards, stationery and other materials, so that everything has a common look and feel.

From their point of view, there are numerous advantages to hiring a professional website designer. Cleland went with a small local graphic design firm, where he already knew the owner. "He was able to cut through the work, ask the right questions, and talk from the point of view of strategic goals," says Cleland, who admits he enjoyed the

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process — especially reviewing photographs of projects the firm has done.

Initially, Cleland listed all of the firm's capabilities, then narrowed that to the ones he wanted to emphasize. The result made him realize that "people didn't appreciate all that we could do." He views the process and the result as telling a story, an extension of the new identity package — including a new logo — which the company did last winter. The website now highlights the new strategic focus, away from plants, to rooftop gardens, built gardens,

as well as wood, metal and other structures and features that are integral parts of Chicago Specialty Gardens' designs.

Although he worked with a professional photographer, Cleland did most of his own writing. However, he was counseled on how to get more hits by using key words on which search engines would zero in, and to cut down on the amount of text, he says.

Recognizing that although he designs landscapes, the web is not his medium, Hursthouse worked with a website designer from the same firm that helped him design a new marketing package, as well as a professional web content writer and a photographer. Part of his website objective was to talk about the company philosophy and people, and to provide an easy way for viewers to quickly look at an abbreviated portfolio showing a variety of types of projects. Quick and easy were his watchwords, noting that people normally do not want to spend a lot of time clicking through a maze of topics. "It is geared for a first impression," he says.

That first impression is enhanced by the use of a professional photographer who understands landscapes, Hursthouse says. "We worked with him and it keeps getting better because we have learned how to work together," he says. "I make sure that I am on the job site with him to help him see things that only a landscape architect would see."

In the end, website design is a collaborative effort. Whether you hire an outside designer or go it alone with an in-house effort, seek opinions and take time to craft the message that you wish to convey. For many people, it may be the first impression they get of your company. And you only get one chance to make a first impression. 

Being there is half the battle...

The web is an ever-increasing resource for landscape contractors. As such, more and more are opting for a web presence. Potential customers often do their research on the web. If you don't have a site, you may lose a part of that business.

Being there is half the battle

Whether or not you choose to go it alone or hire a website designer, there is a series of steps that will help you build the best website for your company. As with any form of advertising or marketing, the first stage involves identifying who will be attracted to this site.

"You need to know who your audience is," says Dee Patel of Graphic Creations, a small design firm in Mundelein. Just as Bob Hursthouse spent time carefully examining other types of websites that his potential clients might use, landscape contractors should pay attention to the look and feel of those that their ideal customers frequent. ILCA's website (ilca.net) includes a "Find a Contractor" feature, making it easy to see what other Illinois landscape contractors are doing on their websites.

The initial phase also should involve determining what to include on the site. This entails some introspection and, perhaps, some team discussion on the focus of the business, as well as what is important to you and your customers.

When determining your site's look, resist the temptation to include all of the bells and whistles. The home page is the client's first introduction to the company. As such, it should not only be attractive and reflect the business' culture, but also be easy to view. Fancy graphics that come from large files may make a site slow to load (come up on the screen), increasing the risk that your viewers will get frustrated and move on. Remember that people are looking at your website with a variety of different hardware and software, not to mention a spectrum of Internet access from the slower dial-up modems to broadband and DSL.

The home page also should clearly lay out the content and navigation system. "Make it attractive, easy to read, pleasing to the eye, and steer clear of a lot of fancy graphics," says Patel. "It has to be easy to navigate." Navigation means getting from one category to another.

It is vital to include examples of projects that your company has done. People want to have photographic examples of the projects. They want to see physical examples to get a feel for the landscape contractor's experience and capabilities.

Hiring an Expert and the Dollars Involved

If you choose to hire a website designer, costs can vary. As it is when you begin to plan the website, the first step often is a tour of the web. Visit a few designers' websites and look at their own portfolios. Gauge whether their work appeals to you, and note how easy their sites are to get around and how well they seem to reflect the companies and products. Often websites will include a link to the designer's own site, so check out a few of your favorites. While you are at it, take notes on what you do and do not like about those that you visit regularly.

Costs will differ, based on the designer's experience, as well as the complexity of the site. Patel charges about \$100 per page for a simple, straightforward website design. On the other hand, Hursthouse paid \$5,000 total for his first site and nearly \$30,000 for his newly designed one. Carr estimates that website design can cost between \$3,000 on the low end to \$20,000 and up for a more complex site. Sharon Bretl-Marrin of Bret-Mar Landscape (bretmarlandscape.com) paid \$2,000 for her first site and expects the redesign to cost about \$3,400, including hosting.

Hosting means the charge — usually nominal — for maintaining the site on a computer server that is connected to the Internet 24 hours a day, every day. Internet Service Providers maintain the

hardware, usually with some contractual assurances that there is backup if something happens to the server. They also are responsible for protecting the website from hackers, and so-called malware — viruses, Trojans, worms, and other malicious software. The hosting charge typically also includes allowing regular access so that you or someone you hire can update the site regularly, but this may come at an extra cost.

Updating or refreshing the site regularly is crucial. "You have to imagine how it is going to look if it hasn't been changed in a year," says Carr. By change, he means updating the portfolio of photographs designed to show your potential customers what you can do. It is also important to ensure that contact and other information is current. While most viewers will be there for the first time, some landscape contractors, like Nature's Perspective Landscaping (naturesperspective.com), design their sites so that they will be useful to current clients as well. It costs a few hundred dollars to update the site regularly, says Rick Prinz, Nature's Perspective's business manager and the person in charge of the site.

Once you are out there, you want people to find you. This means what is known as website optimization, a fancy term for including words in the text, as well as in the underlying programming, that will allow different search engines, such as Google™, to find you. There are professional website optimizers who know how to load the text with the best terms, but many website designers or web content writers understand and employ these techniques. "It's important to rank on the first or second page of the Google list," says Carr. "Paying attention to search engine performance will affect what people see."

All of this may sound complicated, but the bottom line is to keep your website as simple as possible. Make it useful and ensure that it does only what is absolutely necessary to helping your business. 