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# Questions Abound

Where do distributors fit in the e-commerce equation?

By Peter L. McCormick

**T**he dawning of e-commerce in the green industry brings more questions than answers in these early stages, particularly concerning the impact it will have on the front-line customer service provided by local distributors — not to mention the effect on the distributors themselves. Will the convenience of 24-hour-a-day ordering override the consultative selling skills of local salespeople? Will the promise of discount pricing lure a buyer away from his long-time local supplier? Will overnight shipping be fast enough when products or supplies are needed *now*?

Ask a golf course superintendent or sports field manager and you'll get a different answer to these questions than you will from a lawn care operator or landscape contractor. Even though these businesses share a common thread in the green industry, they are

different and are often served by different suppliers.

Since superintendents and sports field managers are stationary and have predictable budgets and buying patterns, they are easily serviced by local or regional distributors and their field salespeople. Being only one step removed from the manufacturer, these field salespeople tend to be well-trained and offer agronomic consultation and extended product demonstrations as part of their service. Equipment setup, warranty service, delivery and credit are also offered by the local distributors.

Lawn care operators, on the other hand, are usually on the move, preferring to order from their local suppliers by calling them on their cell phones or stopping by on the fly. They tend to be serviced by local two-step dealers who purchase from regional distributors rather than directly from the manufac-

turer and have limited field sales staffs, if any. Landscape contractors rely less on their local dealers for consultation, equipment setup, delivery and even credit. As entrepreneurs with profit motives, they also tend to be more price sensitive than at least the private club sector of the golf industry, which tends to let quality and service override price concerns.

The great unknown is how e-commerce fits into this scheme of things. One who can temper conjecture with experience is George Kinkead, president of Minneapolis-based Turfco, a manufacturer of specialty turf equipment for the golf, sports turf and landscape segments of the green industry. Turfco took the e-commerce plunge in late 1999 with the Turfco Direct e-commerce initiative, and it has been a revelation, according to Kinkead.

"We have two distinct markets and distribution systems for our products," Kinkead says. "Our topdressers, material handlers and overseeders are targeted at the golf and sports turf markets, and have always been represented and serviced well by our traditional distributors.

"On the other hand, our lawn care products — the sod cutters, edgers and aerators — had historically been handled by a two-step dealer network. With specialty products like ours, the dealers were too far removed from us to achieve the expertise needed to properly sell and service our products," Kinkead adds.

Turfco launched Turfco Direct "as a way to reach those end users of our lawn care products who were dissatisfied with their local service, as well as open up new markets where we had no representation at all," Kinkead says. "Now those landscape contractors and lawn care people are dealing directly with us and are pleased because they're getting much better service."

By eliminating one step in the supply chain, Turfco reduced its pricing on its lawn care products to the market level, Kinkead notes.

"We wanted to establish one price for our products that was fair and competitive," he adds. "The net result was that pricing dropped slightly in some areas and dramatically in others, depending upon how much some dealers were marking up our products."

Turfco will be adding more lawn care products as well as a range of service parts to Turfco Direct in the near future, but has no inten-

tion of marketing its golf and sports turf products via e-commerce. "The needs of the lawn care and fine turf markets are very different," Kinkead says.

On the turf supply side of the industry, Bob Lippman Sr. has concerns about the emergence of e-commerce. Lippman, a former superintendent and manufacturer's representative, founded Westchester Turf Supply in Lindendale, N.Y., in 1976. He and his son, Bob Jr.,

## Will the convenience of 24-hour-a-day ordering override the consultative selling skills of local salespeople?

sell fertilizers, seed, chemicals and other supplies to 150 golf courses in the metropolitan New York area.

"I just don't see how these e-commerce companies are going to fit into the picture," Lippman says. "The competition between local distributors of turf supplies is strong, not to mention the national companies like Lesco and UHS. Particularly with pre-season programs on pesticides, we're operating on very low — often single digit — profit margins. It's to the point where we're almost cutting each other's throats, profitwise. There's little for an e-commerce middleman to share."

Lippman also questions how well the e-commerce companies will service the needs of his accounts in the traditional sense.

"We have been contacted by several dot-com companies to entice us to participate with them, and I have asked them pointblank whether anyone in their company knows anything about growing fine turf," he says. "They admitted they don't. They're just going at it as a buy-and-sell commodity type of thing when this industry demands more."

Local distributors provide other services like warehousing, staggered delivery schedules and emergency deliveries when needed, Lippman notes.

"Many superintendents don't like to inven-

*Continued on page 14e*

# Questions Abound

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tory large quantities of pesticides or fertilizers for insurance reasons," he adds. "Plus, if a guy calls and needs a case of Daconil in a hurry, we'll have it to him in an hour in most cases. He's not going to get that service over the Internet — at any price."

Some shipping companies refuse to handle restricted-

## Will the promise of discount pricing lure a buyer away from his long-time local supplier?

use or other hazardous materials, and there are licensing issues as well, Lippman says.

"New York state, for instance, requires a pesticide dealer to have a dealer's license," he explains. "We go through the same testing as the end users do, and at least one person in the firm has to be a licensed pesticide applicator."

Further confusing the issue are the recent agency pricing

programs implemented by some chemical manufacturers, and the contracted areas of distribution established and enforced by most manufacturers. With agency pricing, the manufacturer sets a firm retail price and holds title to the product, even while it's in the distributor's warehouse. The distributor can't adjust the price up or down, and is paid a commission or agency fee by the manufacturer for selling and handling the product.

"Agency pricing is a disincentive to shop around," Lippman says, "because you're going to get the same price from everyone."

Greg Nicoll, superintendent at Maplewood (N.J.) CC, doesn't mince words when discussing his needs and the future impact of e-commerce on the green industry.

"As a young superintendent, I attribute a great deal of my success so far to my local suppliers," he says. "If I come in at 6 a.m. and find I need a case of fungicide, I can make a call and it will be here by 7:30. That's very important to me. I'm much more concerned with the consistent health and playability of my golf course than saving a few bucks here and there."

Kinkead likens the dawning of e-commerce to the advent of the adjustable wrench.

"E-commerce is going to be a tool in the toolbox, but not the only tool," he says. "Many people think when one thing evolves, another dies. That isn't really the case."

Certain products will be supported more by e-commerce than others, Kinkead says. "The commodity products — seed, fertilizer, tee and green supplies, hand tools — will be the first to take off, particularly in areas where service isn't up to snuff," he adds.

Manufacturers and front-line distributors must continue to justify premium prices and products with premium service and support in the Internet age, Kinkead stresses.

"Everyone who touches or handles a product has to add value to it," he says. "The guy who thinks, 'I have this territory, these are my customers and they will do business with me,' is a dying breed."

Turfco is planning to use the Internet to help its distributors add value and improve customer service. Its Turfco Direct service center offers charts of the most common service problems with any machines and how to fix them. Solutions are easily available to salespeople and end users.

"If our salespeople can answer customers' questions — or the customers can access the information themselves — the customers will feel better about our products and be more likely to purchase them again," Kinkead says. ■

*Peter L. McCormick is president of Skillman, N.J.-based TurfNet Associates, a provider of print and online information services for the golf course industry.*

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# Tips: Buying Online

By Russell Shaw

**F**rom bunker rakes to mulching equipment, it's becoming easier to buy green industry-related supplies online.

The benefits of ordering supplies and services over the Internet are numerous. You can visit any number of sites and get instant pricing information, as well as technical specifications. Since they can be updated in a few minutes, Web sites will likely have more current prices than that product brochure a turf equipment salesperson dropped off in April.

The best e-commerce sites have other useful features, such as frequently asked questions lists about the products they offer; geographically searchable lists of service technicians and contractors authorized to handle products; pages with e-mail, phone and fax numbers of the company representatives in your area; and e-mail links to vendors themselves.

Green industry e-commerce is, of course, only a small example of the worldwide procurement revolution that the Internet is sparking. The worldwide B2B market is forecast to grow from \$145 billion in 1999 to \$7.29 trillion in 2004, according to Stamford, Conn.-based Internet commerce analysis firm Gartner Group. By 2004, B2B e-commerce will represent 7 percent of the forecasted \$105 trillion total global sales transactions.

"The B2B explosion is imminent, fueled by a combustible mixture of investment financing, IT spending and opportunistic euphoria that is being funneled into startups and brick and mor-

tar's e-commerce initiatives," said Leah Knight, principal analyst for Gartner Group's e-Business Intelligence Services.

Most e-commerce experts break e-commerce into four distinct sectors:

- Companies that sell goods or services directly on their own sites.

- Independent "trading exchanges" operated by third parties specific to an industry or group of industries, where merchandise or services are offered for sale from various and sometimes competing vendors. Examples include Golf-sat ([www.golfsat.com](http://www.golfsat.com)) and Greentrac.com ([www.greentrac.com](http://www.greentrac.com)).

- Auction sites that take competitive bids via e-mail and then verify the transaction after the expiration of the auction period. One example is Auction Equipment.com, which has a section for landscaping supplies.

- Industrywide e-marketplaces, administered by a consortium of companies in a given industry or by a trade association. Although turf management e-commerce has yet to appear in this arena in any meaningful fashion, this is the hottest sector, one which Gartner predicts will be responsible for 37 percent of all B2B online transactional revenue within three years.

## How to find supplies

Your most effective strategy to finding supplies online is to use an Internet index or search engine. Indexes, such as Yahoo! ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)), list groupings of Web sites by category. Search engines such as Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) go through much of the Web every few weeks and construct giant indexes of

Web pages. By entering two search terms, say "sod" and "buy online," you'll see a specially created search results page with listings of, and links to, sod vendors that let you buy over their sites.

## Is ordering safe?

Despite the sensational headlines that erupt when sites are "hacked," most online ordering is safe. Most sites that take credit card numbers are encrypted, which means the information you type into an order form is given a unique code by your browser that only the merchant's or site's e-commerce processing software can decipher.

Just as your bull detector goes off when you meet a bunk-artist salesperson in the real world, there are standards you can use to verify if a Web site you're thinking about buying from is legit. After all, in the real world, a face-to-face meeting, a handshake, a hand-signed contract all help foster trust. Yet in e-commerce, you don't get to see your seller's face — just its Web site.

Just in case you have even a little doubt, the Better Business Bureau suggests you avoid doing business with sites that can't be checked. "If a site will not divulge a street address and telephone number, something fishy is probably going on," the BBB says.

Fortunately, these incidents are rare. If they weren't, businesses wouldn't be flocking to Web-based purchasing. ■

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*Russell Shaw, a Portland, Ore.-based freelance writer, covers e-commerce issues for various publications and Web sites.*

## Take Advantage of the Web

**b**ack in 1998, I was one of the first landscape professionals to realize the value of the Internet. Since then, I've never looked back.

As a 23-year-old owner of my own lawn care company, Lawnicure, I could already feel my knees and back giving out. So I decided to work smarter, not harder. With an initial investment of \$300, I created a Web page that described my company and the services I offered, and put my Web domain name ([www.lawnicure.com](http://www.lawnicure.com)) on my business cards. I also put that domain name in with my Yellow Pages advertisements to stretch my advertising dollars.

A month later, I added a lawn care message forum to my Web page so that landscape professionals who visited the site could say hello or ask me a question. This forum became popular, so in January 1999 I registered the domain [www.lawnsite.com](http://www.lawnsite.com), sold my lawn care company and started selling advertising space on the site.

As hundreds of thousands of lawn care company owners started visiting my site monthly, manufacturers saw the value of sponsoring LawnSite.com with a banner (a small rectangle with the sponsor's company advertisement in it). Some people who see a certain product advertised might have something negative to say about it in the public discussion forum, but others with different experiences will talk highly about it. The great thing is that the manufacturer can jump into the discussion as well.

Today, LawnSite.com is the most popular lawn care message forum on the Internet with more than 600,000 monthly page views, 20,000 different discussions on commercial lawn care and 1,100 registered lawn care company owners.

Forum participants enjoy the interaction with their peers. Ed Wagner of [www.turfquip.com](http://www.turfquip.com) sums it up nicely: "Lawn care operators nationwide share a common set of industry specific problems — poor public perception, lack of profitability, availability of labor and changing technology, to name a few. By sharing common concerns, LawnSite members are able to reach common solutions by saving time, money and shortening the learning curve."

Moving forward, I've invested \$10,000 additional dollars in hiring a software programming company to add a lawn care company directory and online marketplace to my site. I'm also creating LawnSites.com, which will offer web page design services to lawn care companies.

All landscape professionals will eventually use e-commerce to benefit themselves and their companies. Watch out, local parts dealers, because you can't compete with the low overhead the Internet offers — LCOs will buy directly from wholesale outlets for big savings and the product will be delivered to their doorsteps. LCOs will also be able to research before they buy by talking to thousands of their peers across the country, not to mention getting industry news and events in minutes. Manufacturers will be able to reach a new market and get insight from LCOs on what they're looking for in equipment. Consumers will be able to find lawn companies and receive bids in minutes.

If your company is not using the Internet, your competition is. You're missing out on a vast amount of knowledge and giving extra money to your local parts dealer to cover his overhead. If you're looking for an excuse to buy a new computer, the Internet is one you should take advantage of. ■



**Chuck Keough**  
Owner,  
LawnSite.com

# Will Surf for Work

The Web's a great place to go job hunting.

Here's a primer for the golf and landscape industries

BY JOE DYSART

**T**here may have been a time in America when it was easier to get a job, but if someone remembers, please let us know. With the unemployment rate regularly dipping below 4 percent, it's a stupendous time to go job surfing. And as luck would have it, the Web offers tools aplenty for the employment-seeking opportunist.

But before you hit the job boards, a stop by [www.job-huntersbible.com](http://www.job-huntersbible.com) would be beneficial. Maintained by Dick Belles, author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, the site is full of insights and tools for job searching on the Web. Another great source is *The Guide to Internet Job Searching*, by Margaret R. Dikel, France Roehm and Steve Oserman.

As you might expect, green industry-specific job boards are great for quickly honing your search. But these boards do not offer many frills. If you're looking for in-depth research, job-seeking advice and a high volume of offerings, you'll also want to check out the general interest boards.

As with most things on the Internet, the opportunities for finding a green job through the Web are growing exponentially as its user base continues to grow. Job seekers have literally thousands of general interest job boards from which to choose — and dozens of boards devoted exclusively to green jobs.

Indeed, by January 1998, 17 percent of *Fortune* Global 500 companies were cruising the Net for employees, according to iLogos.com ([www.ilogos.com](http://www.ilogos.com)), a market research firm. Last year, the figured jumped to 45 percent. Over-

all, high-tech market research firm Forrester Research projects that businesses will be spending \$1.7 billion by 2003 to snap up new employees via the Web.

Either way, boards that show up first in popular search engine returns to keywords like "golf jobs" or "landscaping jobs" should be among the first ones to try. Job boards that send e-mail alerts are also handy.

Other features to consider with a job board: How easy is it for employers to post a new job offering, and what's the overall feel of the site? If the site feels friendly, professional and first-rate, there's a better chance the employer behind the board is offering the same kind of position.

## Green-specific job boards

Green industry-specific job boards generally aren't as sophisticated as the general interest boards. But given that the boards are essentially in the backwoods of the Web, chances

## Finding work

Check out these green industry sites if you want to go job hunting or look for capable workers:

[greenindustryjobs.com](http://greenindustryjobs.com)  
[getajob.com](http://getajob.com)  
[nurseryman.com](http://nurseryman.com)  
[landscapejobs.com](http://landscapejobs.com)  
[gcsaa.org](http://gcsaa.org)  
[turfnet.com](http://turfnet.com)  
[earthworks-jobs.com](http://earthworks-jobs.com)  
[greensearch.com](http://greensearch.com)  
[amigos-inc.com](http://amigos-inc.com)  
[brickmangroup.com](http://brickmangroup.com)  
[florapersonnel.com](http://florapersonnel.com)

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# Will Surf for Work

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are greater that you'll come across a new opening no one else has seen.

A good place to start in this category is [www.greenindustryjobs.com](http://www.greenindustryjobs.com), where you can scan for job offers in four categories — irrigation, landscaping, tree care and nursery. You can search for jobs by date posted, state, territory, province, region or zip code.

[www.nurseryman.com](http://www.nurseryman.com) offers an informal jobs and resume-posting bulletin board, and [www.landscape-jobs.com](http://www.landscape-jobs.com) appeals to an extremely narrow niche. For the scientifically inclined, [www.earthworks-jobs.com](http://www.earthworks-jobs.com) is a source of job openings for plant, forestry and soil scientists.

More than a few golf and landscaping industry types are attracted to the industry by a desire to do something good for the earth. There are no shortage of boards that specialize in jobs that emphasize a healthy respect for the environment. Among these are [www.ecbonline.com](http://www.ecbonline.com) (Environmental Careers Bulletin Online), [www.environment.com](http://www.environment.com), [www.ejobs.com](http://www.ejobs.com) and [www.ashs.org/hortops.html](http://www.ashs.org/hortops.html) (Hort Opportunities).

## General interest job boards

Not surprisingly, general interest job Web sites offer a more sophisticated site design, more job and career help tools — and many more green jobs. Of course, the downside is that these boards are so popular, you're chance of seeing a new job first is slim at best.

All of the boards below placed among the top 10 most-trafficked job boards in 1999, according to Media Metrix, an Internet media market research firm. All placed among the top links recommended by Top 10 Links, a Web-site review firm that rates sites based on traffic, usability and best overall performance. They are:

**www.monster.com:** For many analysts, Monster is essentially the benchmark by which all other job boards are measured. Sporting an extremely slick interface, Monster allows employers to post jobs in real time and gives them access to more than one million résumés. Loaded with columns and articles on job hunting, Monster also offers detailed online ad-

Click on the site of your choice!

- Irrigation Jobs [www.irrigationjobs.com](http://www.irrigationjobs.com)
- Landscaping Careers [www.landscapingcareers.com](http://www.landscapingcareers.com)
- Green Industry Jobs [www.greenindustryjobs.com](http://www.greenindustryjobs.com)
- Tree Care Jobs [www.treecarejobs.com](http://www.treecarejobs.com)
- Nursery Jobs [www.nurseryjobs.com](http://www.nurseryjobs.com)

Coming Soon - New Job Sites for Turf and Golf Courses

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Landscapejobs.com specializes in the job search of landscape professionals throughout the United States. If you are anyone you know is looking to relocate or find a new position, we have positions available from major managers to entry level.

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Landscapejobs.com appeals to an extremely narrow niche.

visories for those thinking of switching careers, transferring military skills to the private sector and other special-case scenarios. You'll also find chat rooms to swap job search war stories, and you can research company profiles.

**www.careerpath.com:** Offering a simple, inviting, uncluttered home page, CareerPath also automatically imports ads from employer sites twice a week — so you know the listings are current. Green job hunters here can also search ads posted on the Web or by nearly 90 affiliated newspapers. The chat rooms, bulletin boards, articles and other features you'd expect at a top board are here. As a bonus, there are live, scheduled chats with leading recruiters and career counselors.

**www.careermosaic.com:** If you're a recent college grad looking for a green job, this should be one of your first stops. The entire site emphasizes help

for the recent grad, including a résumé writing help center. For the especially adventurous, there's also a special domain devoted to employers outside the United States who are seeking job candidates.

**www.hotjobs.com:** In addition to the standard services found at other top sites, HotJobs enables you to control which companies see your résumé online. It has an easy-to-use tracking service that will inform you how often your résumé has come up in a search, and how many times it has been viewed. Another perk: HotJobs offers a free e-mail account to any and all takers. Plus, a number of employers have links here that lead back to their company home pages.

**www.job-search-engine.com:** Strictly a meta-search engine and not a job board, the site queries hundreds of job boards for a specified green job and returns links to all job boards offering such posts. Essentially, it's the place to go for a quick down-and-dirty look on what green jobs are available and nothing more. ■

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- Post Your Resume
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My Monster

Many consider Monster.com an industry standard.

Joe Dysart, an Internet business consultant based in Thousand Oaks, Calif., can be reached at [joedysart@digitalubiquity.com](mailto:joedysart@digitalubiquity.com).



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## Defining E-Commerce

**Address verification** — Process used by a credit card processor or other party to verify that a customer's ordering address matches its records.

**Authorization** — Process of making sure you have enough money in your bank account or line of credit to afford the item you want to buy. If all goes well, an authorization code is created and the money is deducted from your account/line of credit.

**Back end/Office** — The secret password-protected part of an e-commerce site where the merchant does the dirty work of managing the site, counting the money, and adding and/or deleting pages. It's similar to the back room of a regular store — except nobody (hopefully) comes out to say, "If it's not on the shelves, we don't have it!"

**Banner** — An often-annoying interactive advertisement on a Web site that will pop up by just brushing it with a cursor at the most inopportune time.

**Card not present merchant account** — Account allowing merchants to process credit cards without the cardholder actually being there. Internet merchants need Card not present merchant accounts

to conduct business online.

**Certificate authority** — Third party which verifies the identity of merchants and their sites.

**Check-out stand** — Shipping and payment-processing area of an e-commerce site. Contains bill-to and ship-to information, along with payment method.

**Commerce server** — Server that manages and maintains transactions and back-end data for an e-commerce Web site.

**CyberCash** — Secure gateway for authorization and capture of credit-card funds.

**Cyberpunks** — Knowledgeable computer buffs with attitude.

**Delayed settlement processing**

— Once a transaction has been authorized, the merchant must ship goods before transaction can be settled. Delayed settlements are stored online until the merchant selects the transactions for settlement.

**Digital or electronic cash** — Also called e-cash, it is making payments by transmitting a number from one computer to another. The numbers, just like those on a dollar bill, are issued by a bank and represent specified sums of real money. Digital cash is anonymous and reusable, like real cash.

**Digital certificate** — Issued by a certificate authority, it verifies to the shopper that the virtual store is asso-

ciated with a physical address and phone number, which can increase the shopper's confidence in the merchant.

**Digital signature** — Digital code attached to an electronically transmitted message that identifies the sender. It's like a written signature, and is important for electronic commerce and a key factor in most authentication methods.

**Digital wallet** — Encryption software that's used like a real wallet during e-commerce transactions. It holds a user's payment information, a digital certificate to identify the user and shipping information to speed transactions. The "wallet" is also encrypted against fraud.

**Disintermediation** — Cutting out the middleman, such as when Internet-based companies bypass traditional retail channels to sell directly to customers.

**Electronic check** — Takes money from users' checking accounts to pay bills.

**Electronic wallet** — Stores your credit card numbers on your hard drive in an encrypted form.

### Cookie

**Message given to Web browser by Web server. The browser stores the message in a text file called cookie.txt. The message is then sent back to the server each time the browser requests a page from the server. The purpose is to identify users and possibly prepare customized Web pages for them. When you enter a Web site using cookies, you may be asked to fill out a form providing such information as your name and interests. This information is packaged into a cookie and sent to your Web browser, which stores it for later use.**