

# Get mobile with tech

Getting mobile has never been easier with new tech tools designed to increase your efficiency at home, the office or the truck

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It's no secret that landscape professionals are busy these days. It pays to be everywhere at once, to get back to clients instantly, to be in constant contact with crews...and to do all of this anywhere. Let's face it: landscape work is outside work, so anything that can get you out of the office but maintain your level of productivity is a good thing, right? There's a host of hot technology toys you can use on the road or in the office, and they're not only increasing productivity and efficiency but boosting the bottom line.



## Efficiency is Job 1

When you talk high tech toys with Dwight Hughes, president of Dwight Hughes Nursery in Cedar Rapids, IA, the first thing he'll tell you is that they don't even make his top three list of most valuable tools.

"My most valuable high tech tool is my Kubota backhoe loader. My second most valuable high tech tool is my Power Trac 1430 with all the attachments," Hughes says. "Make no mistake — we make money by putting plants in the ground."

But Hughes didn't build an industry-wide reputation as an innovator by being hard-headed. He has recognized how new technology can help landscape managers do their jobs better.

"You have to decide what's going to be good for your own operation," Hughes says.

In his case, it was PalmPilots and cell phones. He has four





Dwight Hughes

PalmPilots, which are located in different places: his desk, his wife's desk, his nightstand and his truck. So far, having them on the road has been invaluable.

"They have all of our customers' addresses and phone numbers in them," Hughes says. "They are very simple, store a lot more information in a small space and help me manage my time more effectively."

Their cost wasn't an issue with Hughes, as money, he said, comes in third in his decision making process. "The expense wasn't so much an issue as trying to find the correct version."

While he can't transfer invoice information from the PalmPilot to his computer en route to the office, he can once he gets there by plugging it into the computer.

One thing Hughes and his employees can do while driving is make phone calls, since each truck has a mounted cell phone. And they're mounted for a reason.

"I prefer not to be obsessed with the phone," Hughes says. "We try not to abuse it. A lot of people aren't being efficient in their usage. When we make a call, we make sure it is important and has some value to the sender and receiver."

When the phone rings, it activates the truck's horn so someone is alerted. Usually, the call is about client concerns, a change in a job or an update on a job completion.

If anyone appreciates cell phones, it's Hughes. He remembers staying on the phone at night from one to two hours and having to stop to use pay phones while on the road. Then, he bought radio phones for \$3,000 apiece that cost \$.60 per minute to use. "Now, those two hours are saved every night," he says.

Hughes doesn't have a Web site, and it's not because he hasn't had time to construct one. "My customers are not going to react to a Web site," Hughes says. "They react when they see our trucks in their neighborhood or see me at a civic event."

Hughes' rule for buying technological tools is simple: if they help you become more productive, then they're worth it. He says busi-

nesses have to be wary of being blinded by the technology craze.

"A lot of leadership people in this industry have pagers, cell phones and fax machines, while the guys on the job have nothing to work with," he says. "That's why they're not reaching their goals."

### Mobile with a purpose

With a large landscape company with four satellite offices in Laurel, MD, being able to communicate wherever you are is important to Bozzuto Landscaping. Each manager has his own PC at the office, and half have company-supported computers at home.

"We have three in-house computer people to support our managers at home, plus we give them all the software and hook them up so they can operate, get e-mail and run bids," Davis says.

Critics might say that all those computers add up to too much office time and not enough field time. That's why Davis says that in October, the PCs will be phased out in favor of laptops his managers can take on the road to work up estimates and contracts.

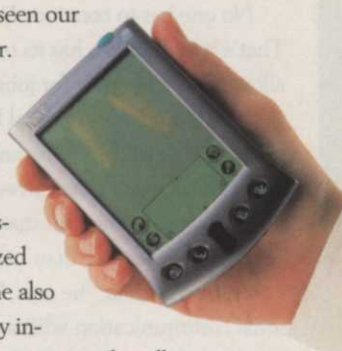
Each branch also has a digital camera, which managers take with them in their trucks to snap photos of properties. A designer then downloads it into a computer and, through the use of design software called Micrographics, adds landscape plantings to show a client how the property might look prior to doing any physical work. All of the designing is done in the office, sometimes in front of a client.

"It has been a huge sales tool for us," Davis says of the company's digital design services. "We've seen our enhancement sales grow at 20% a year. How much of that is attributable to designing is hard to say, but it's a lot."

All 10 managers are supplied with PalmPilots to help them keep their customer lists, leads and schedules organized while driving from site to site. Everyone also has a Nextel phone, which has not only increased communication but saved the company a bundle.

"The Nextel phones eliminated our pagers because we can get text paging. They can also send us messages rather than calling us,"

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"We get one-third of our business from getting back to clients quickly." — Larry Brinkley, president, BLT Landscape Services



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— Bruce Allentuck, owner, Allentuck Landscaping



Tom Davis

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Davis says. "We were saving about \$1,200 a month, and those savings have increased since then because we now have more units."

Even though Bozzuto's truck mileage is tracked manually by a fleet manager who regularly e-mails his reports, the company is currently looking at tracking devices that work off the Global Positioning System

(GPS). The GPS involves a terminal in the truck that would read coded signals from satellites and determine its location.

"With increased fuel costs, it's huge to be able to conserve wherever possible," Davis said.

No one has to convince Davis about the Internet's power. That's why Bozzuto has its own Web site: to market the company, allow people to apply for jobs on-line and sell used equipment.

"We'll send the potential buyer a digital picture of the equipment," Davis said. "We recently sold 11 pieces of equipment and shipped them six states away."

Davis encourages his managers to stay out of the office as well. "E-mails are quicker than having lengthy conversations, so sometimes it saves time," he says. "In some cases, if you take out personal communication with a client, it's a problem. Some love talking through e-mail, others don't."

Davis believes there is such a thing as relying on technology too much. "We realized that the people who needed to see certain things like job performance and bids didn't see them because it was all done on computers," he says. "We now have tracking boards or scheduling boards so crews can see whether they're winning or losing."

#### Apt to try anything

Larry Brinkley, president of BLT Landscape Services, Dallas, TX, says he has a liberal approach to technology, with a "try anything"

attitude. And it's no surprise, given that he conducts half of his business on a cell phone, usually on the go. BLT used to have radios in all of the trucks, but now it has the Nextel communication system.

"Radios were okay, but now we can get Johnny on the spot and handle things instantaneously," Brinkley said. "We do pay for air-time, so the expense for calls has gone up, but our overall efficiency has improved."

Brinkley says his \$2 million company doesn't have laptops yet, but will soon because he feels everyone would be more productive if they could take their computers on the road. He is eager to get those laptops so design software can be taken on the road and customers can see instantly what the addition of a tree or mulch bed in their yard might look like. He says his design software, his is Green Thumb, has accounted for a 37% increase in sales.

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## Tech tools—one step at a time

Before deciding whether to invest in the latest technology for your operation, ask yourself a few questions:

1. Is it right for my service mix?
2. Is it cost effective?
3. Can it be as effective outside the office as inside?
4. Will it help the overall operation become more efficient and productive?
5. Is it a top priority now or can it wait?



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Responding to people quickly, either on the road or at the office, has a huge impact on business, says Brinkley. "We get one-third of our business from getting back to clients quickly. We get calls in the spring and fall from people who say we were the only one to call them back." He averages about 20 e-mails a day, and says he has sold two or three large jobs just through e-mail.

"We don't just communicate with them through e-mail," Brinkley says. "We make sure our foremen talk to clients on site or leave a note explaining what we're doing. If there's a problem, we call instead of e-mail."

### Changing times

When Bob Rennebohm bought Heard Gardens Ltd. of Johnston, IA, nine years ago, the company had no computers, cell phones or fax machines. "If I look back, I see that we haven't grown much with people but we have with equipment."

Now, all project managers have computers at work and at home where they can log into the company network any time. Rennebohm himself has a laptop, which has helped him manage the company's finances and communicate through e-mail either on the road or at the office.

The company, which has 42 employees and grossed \$1.7 million last year, recently began using design software, SoftDesk Landscape Assistant, to boost sales.

Rennebohm is currently looking to buy PalmPilots to help all crew supervisors manage their time more effectively. He's also looking to acquire the Asset software program by the end of the year to download crew work reports and job times.

Heard has a comprehensive Web site with the primary purpose of providing information. However, Rennebohm hinted at selling landscape plants online one day through a retail garden center, not to mention his world famous lilacs, which are currently ordered through the mail.

Rennebohm has also investigated using GPS, but decided it

wasn't for his company. "What they're working on right now is integrating the equipment right in the cab of the truck," he said. "The pricing right now isn't cost effective for what we're doing."

## On the verge

Bruce Allentuck, owner of Allentuck Landscaping, Gaithersburg, MD, recognizes the value of designing landscapes via computer. It's one of the things, like doing estimates, for which his managers use their computers.

"It's a time saver because it allows you to move things in the landscape around quicker," Allentuck said. "Hand drawings are okay, too, but doing it on the computer presents an air of professionalism to clients and prospective clients." He says the use of design software to create virtual landscapes has boosted sales, especially of big jobs.

What also helps with sales is access to hortocopia.com, a database of 3,800 plant pictures. Allentuck and his managers can download the pictures and print them out in color on glossy paper, ready for the client to view. When they add laptops in the future, they will be able to take them in their trucks to make instant sales on site.

He is currently exploring PalmPilots and the GPS, but is not ready to commit just yet.

"You have to integrate all of this technology carefully because there is a lot of junk out there," Allentuck said. "There are cool and fun things, but whether they can be used to make your operation more efficient is the question."

"We absolutely rely on these technological tools," Allentuck said. "We could survive without them only if our competition didn't have them as well."