

COVER STORY

# DIGITAL SLOTS

BY **MARTY WHITFORD**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF





## Playing the odds, landscapers move more marketing bets from printed local business directories to their Web sites, search engine optimization strategies, e-newsletters and pay-per-click spots.

MARKETING AND GAMBLING ARE CLOSE COUSINS.

"With both, you gotta play to win — but you also have to know when to walk away," says Steve Chepurny, president of Beechwood Landscape Architecture & Construction, a \$6 million-a-year business based in Southampton, NJ.

Every year, Chepurny, like many landscape company owners, spends thousands of dollars hoping his number comes up — his business' telephone number, that is, as homeowners leaf through pages of landscaping and lawn care ads in various printed local business directories. Last year, Beechwood Landscape spent more than \$14,000 on print business-directory ads.

"Our Yellow Pages ads yielded just 11 calls and zero new business," Chepurny says. "The few leads that did come in were mediocre, and I'm being generous when I say mediocre."

After failing to break even on these marketing spends in recent years, Chepurny scratched 85% of his print business-directory advertising. He's betting — and winning — big on digital slots such as the company's Web site, BeechwoodLandscape.com, search engine optimization (SEO) strategies — to rank among the top listings when consumers search Google, Yahoo and other Web engines — and online ads with links on referral sites, such as SuperPages.com and AngiesList.com.

"Pulling most of our print business directory ads was a difficult decision because every Tom, Dick and Harry has ads in those books," Chepurny says. "But digital marketing is where it's at. The odds on returns are much better. Our

Web site and pay-per-click ads generated 125 leads and 30 new customers last year — and we invested just half the amount there that we spent on printed business-directory ads."

Chepurny no longer follows the marketing spends of Tom, Dick and Harry. His digital marketing returns place him at the front of a new and growing pack: hungry, savvy landscapers who bet with their wallets, not their peers.

Landscape professionals like Chepurny smartly are following their customers and prospects to the Web. They're shifting more of their marketing bets from traditional printed local business directories to their company Web sites, SEO strategies, customer e-newsletters and pay-per-click ad spots to attract more prospects, better serve their customers and green their bottom lines.



Steve Chepurny

### Playing the numbers

Beechwood Landscape recently invested \$2,500 to upgrade its Web site and SEO, and routinely spends \$500 to \$600 per month on pay-per-click ads. The company also pays \$400 per month for an expanded listing and link on SuperPages.com — the digital counterpart to Yellow Pages' print directories — and \$125 per month for a similar spot on AngiesList.com. Monthly e-newsletters packed with landscaping tips and special offers help the company nurture its business relation-



ships, upsell maintenance services and reap referrals. (Note: For tips on launching a customer e-newsletter, read this month's *Whit's World* on page 56.)

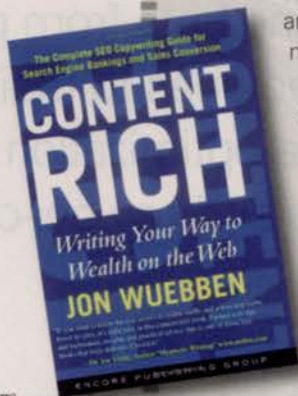
"We're spending more on digital marketing than ever before, and with good reason — our online investments pay for themselves many times over," Chepurny says.

Printed local business directories help keep the phone ringing at New Castle, CO-based Dwyer Greens & Flowers, but owner Lynn Dwyer says the calls usually waste time.

"Most of the calls we get out of those books are from price shoppers or homeowners looking for free on-site consultations or phone advice," Dwyer says. "I work 90 hours a week during our peak season. I don't have time for monkey business."

Dig Right In Landscaping in Brookfield, IL, is another digital marketing believer. During the past two years, the company cut its annual print business-directory ad spend by two-thirds to \$4,000. The company reinvested part

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## WINNING THE WEB'S GREAT RACE

Remember frantically racing your sibling, elbowing each other all the way to the side door, just to be the first to tell Mom your version of the story? Turns out, even those bruising experiences teach valuable business lessons.

Winning The Great Race to tell your story first is what search engine optimization (SEO) is all about, says Jon Wuebben, author of "Content Rich: Writing Your Way to Wealth on the Web." Wuebben spoke at the Turf and Ornamental Communicators Association's (TOCA's) 20th annual meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, May 12-14.

"An overwhelming majority — up to 70% — assume the companies atop Google and other search-engine rankings are the clear leaders in their fields," Wuebben says. "Do you know where you rank — and why?"

Some of Wuebben's SEO tips are:

- ▶ Subscribe to [wordtracker.com](http://wordtracker.com) (\$275/year) or [keyworddiscovery.com](http://keyworddiscovery.com) (\$50/month) to stay abreast of the most-searched words online.
  - ▶ Write down the search words most pertinent to your business — in order of their popularity.
  - ▶ Incorporate one to three of these search words on each page of your Web site(s), digital press releases, e-newsletters and blogs.
  - ▶ Use three or fewer different keywords on each Web site page, taking care to not repeat the words more than three times per page because it will hinder your rankings on search engines.
  - ▶ Use more-vague search words such as "lawn maintenance" on more-general Web pages, and more-detailed terms such as "zero-turn mower" on more-specific pages.
  - ▶ Constantly add links to and from your Web site and measure your related traffic progress at [linkpopularity.com](http://linkpopularity.com).
  - ▶ Hyperlink your press releases, e-newsletters and blogs to your Web site and offer RSS (reader subscription service) feeds.
- "Want to grow your Web of influence?" Wuebben asks. "Follow these simple steps and you'll race right past your online competitors." — MW



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## COVER STORY

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of the \$8,400 annual savings by partnering with ServiceMagic.com, an online generator of qualified leads.

Most consumers have migrated away from print business directories and now surf the Web for services, says Jeff Swano, president of the \$700,000-a-year business.



Jeff Swano

"I can't tell you how many of our customers tell us they don't open those yellow or white books anymore," Swano says. "But I can tell you our return on investment with

ServiceMagic.com blows away those print directories — just don't tell anyone."

Swano spends about \$400 per month on ServiceMagic.com leads. He also recently invested \$1,500 for a Web site renovation and \$2,500 for SEO.

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## TWEETY SOARS



Morse, meet Twitter, your telegram technology replacement.

Twitter is the world's new e-telegram, says digital marketing guru Jon Wuebben, who spoke at the Turf and Ornamental Communicators Association's (TOCA's) recent 20th anniversary meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Wuebben points out that when US Airways flight 1549 crashed into New York's Hudson River Jan. 15, twitter.com broke the news first thanks to a tweet (a microblog of 140 or fewer characters) by one of the passengers on the plane.

Twitter is no stranger to scoops — or crashes. Just a few weeks before the Hudson River incident, passenger Mike Wilson (login "2drinksbehind") tweeted his first-hand account of Continental flight 737 veering off a runway in Denver and catching fire. Wilson's initial tweet on the accident comprised less than

50 characters, yet virtually managed to seat people throughout the world right beside him on flight 737: "Holy f\*\*\*ing s\*\*t - I wasb-just in a plane crash!"

Thirty-three minutes later, another tweet showed Wilson's fear dissipating (no typos were made; no censorship was needed), as his logic and humor resurfaced: "This was crash #2 for me. Maybe I should start taking the bus."

Armed with just a cell phone, any tweeter in the right place at the right time (or in this case, in the wrong place at the wrong time) can scoop a pack of reporters. Twitter is easier and faster than blogging, and uploading photos is a snap. It's better for readers, too: "It's immediate, unfiltered and free," Wuebben adds.

"Twitter, Facebook and YouTube complete the SMO — Social Media Optimization — technology triumvirate," Wuebben says. "If you want to be 'in' — to really know things and be known — you better be 'there.'" — MW



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## COVER STORY

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Part of the numbers game favoring digital marketing involves the proliferation of print directories. More than 120 publishers sell ads for a combined more than 7,000 local reference books. Swano and other landscape contractors say consumers' cabinets are stuffed with so many business directories that it's much easier to surf online for services than try and open the bulging Pandora's box.

### Yellow free

Dave Flannery, owner of Big Creek Landscapes in Alpharetta, GA, canceled the company's print business-directory advertising in 2005 and doesn't regret it.



Dave Flannery

Flannery is in the choir when it comes to singing the praises of *continued on page 16*



## BETTING ON DIGITAL

**Two-thirds** of landscape contractors say their digital marketing investments offer greater returns than traditional telephone directory ads.

**Three-quarters** say digital marketing beats local newspaper, TV and radio ads.

Source: July 2009 Landscape Management online survey with 170 respondents.

## PROSPECTING TOOLS

1. Corporate Web site
2. Search engine optimization
3. (tie) Social networking sites and e-newsletters
4. Digital advertising
5. (tie) Blogging and online information such as press releases and free white papers

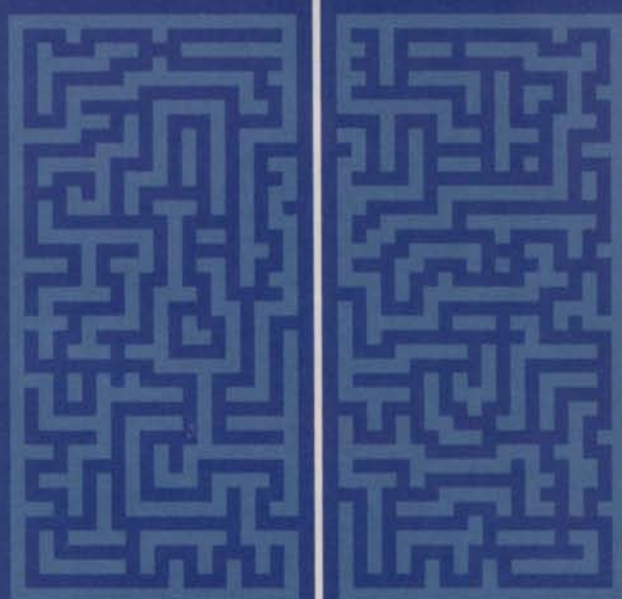


## SURVEY SAYS ... USE ME

**79%** of landscape contractors do not e-mail customers satisfaction surveys at least once annually.



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### HOOKING 'EM

**7%** of landscape contractors generate more than half of their new-business leads from their Web sites, e-newsletters and other digital marketing efforts.

**12%** say digital marketing accounts for one-quarter to half of their leads.

**27%** say digital marketing generates one-tenth to one-quarter of their leads.

**54%** say digital marketing delivers less than one-tenth of their leads.

### REELING 'EM IN

**20%** of landscape contractors convert more than half of their digital marketing leads into new business.

**22%** convert one-quarter to half of their digital marketing leads.

**19%** convert one-tenth to one-quarter of their digital marketing leads.

**39%** convert less than one-tenth of their digital marketing leads.

— Source: July 2009 Landscape Management online survey with 170 respondents.

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digital marketing. In past work lives, he held various sales-and-marketing positions with technology giants Compuware and Peregrine Systems. Now, he's focused on reinventing Big-CreekLandscapes.com.

"We're updating our Web site because many of the portfolio photos we're showcasing are a few years old, and in our line of work nothing quite sells like a few great before-and-after shots, coupled with customer testimonials," Flannery says. "There are several phases to reinventing ourselves online and becoming a true destination site rather than just an electronic brochure."

For example, Flannery wants to add an online shopping cart so the company can tap a new revenue stream — marketing retail items such as pond supplies, fish food and bird houses — while feeding new-business leads to the company's landscape design/build business. Later this year, he plans to launch

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## COVER STORY

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a monthly e-newsletter that promotes the upgraded Web site and provides landscape maintenance tips, special offers and photos/recaps of recently completed work.

Flannery hasn't gone "all in" on digital advertising. He says local glossy print magazines still provide solid

returns on his marketing investments.

"You can't showcase your landscape work in those yellow print directories," Flannery says. "The few leads we did get from those ads weren't quality. The people generally were calling us, and three to five other companies, just to obtain the lowest price possible — and that's the kind of business we're not interested in."

## Most mix bets

Chepurny and Flannery are atypical. While many professionals are following their lead and moving more marketing dollars to digital venues, most still maintain paid presences in their printed local business directories.

"We cut way back on our Yellow Pages advertising, from a few hundred dollars a month to \$60, but we're still in there," Dwyer says. "We get a free one-line listing in one category for being located in the area, and we pay for similar listings under four or five other headings — so we can cover our bets across nursery wholesale and retail, landscape maintenance, design/build and installation."

Printed local directory ads still can help build business. They accounted for 11% of new customers last year for

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# 407

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Cashview Job	Planting	-	-	-	7:58	7:45	15:47
		7:38	7:35	7:53	7:58	7:45	38:53

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## VIRTUALLY ABSENT

9% of landscape contractors don't have a Web site.



## PROTECTING CUSTOMER BASES

**61%** of landscapers do not, and will not, list key clients on their Web sites — even knowing the information can be password protected.

## PROPRIETARY PRICING

of landscape contractors do not, and will not, list pricing for basic services on their Web sites — even knowing the information can be password protected.



Source: July 2009 Landscape Management online survey with 170 respondents.



## COVER STORY

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Austin, TX-based Cutting Edge Lawn Care. The Internet, however, draws more new business, says Jerry Tindel, Cutting Edge's office manager who sidelines as its director of marketing.

"Yellow Pages cost us \$394.50 for each new client they brought us in the first half of 2009," Tindel says. "The

Web cost us just \$183.13 for each new customer. Twice as many customers — 23 — came to us through the Web."

Printed local business directories not only still win advertising dollars from Tindel, but they also prompted him and his son, Todd — who founded the business in the eighth grade — to change the company's name.

"When I came aboard in 1994, we changed the business' name from Todd's Lawn Care to Cutting Edge Lawn Care just so



Jerry Tindel

we could be among the first lawn care listings in printed local business directories," Tindel adds. "It was the precursor to search engine optimization — have your company name begin with A, B or C."

Most contractors say the Internet will win even more advertising marketshare, but project the Yellow Pages and other printed local business directories will remain viable marketing vehicles for years.

"Our Web site and monthly e-newsletters are occupying more of our time and investments, but print still has a place," says Frank Roberts, owner and self-proclaimed chief bottle washer for Brandon, Manitoba, Canada-based Eco Green. "Capturing top-of-mind awareness requires a multi-pronged marketing strategy."

Social networking sites and other digital marketing portals are "the weave of the future," says Priya Hutner, avid Facebooker and director of marketing for Longwood, FL-based Nanaks Landscaping. She, too, mixes her marketing bets, but mostly among the digital arena.

"The Web gives us a world of new marketing opportunities," Hutner says. "Just as important, all of these new digital tools make marketing much less of a gamble." LM

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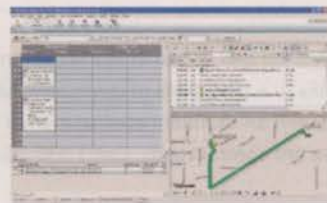
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