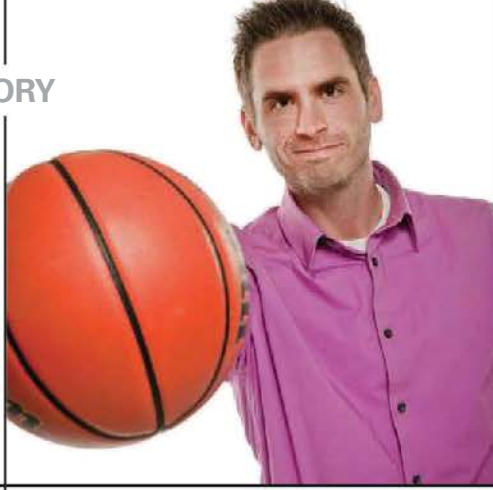


COVER STORY



→ GAME CH



The Weed Pro inbound marketing team takes a break from strategy to have fun with the roundball. From left: consultant Keith Gutierrez, Director of Marketing Shaun Canary and President and CEO Rob Palmer.

INBOUND MARKETING HAS TRANSFORMED THE WAY WEED PRO DOES BUSINESS.

STORY BY MARISA PALMIERI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
LAURA WATILO BLAKE

ANGER

IF

2012 WERE A BASKETBALL SEASON for Weed Pro, it would have been a rebuilding year. But not a typical rebuilding year—when

losing is the norm and the team's pinning its hopes on landing a star in next year's draft. It would be more like an L.A. Lakers rebuilding year, says Weed Pro's Director of Marketing Shaun Canary with a laugh, just weeks after the NBA team fired Coach Mike Brown a mere five games into the 2012 season.

His point? Weed Pro—driven by President and CEO Rob Palmer's plan for growth and ambitious goal to earn 75 percent of the company's business through referrals—didn't have time to lose. Starting late last year, the company made a fast break toward a new strategy: inbound marketing.

The results have been a game changer for the \$3 million-plus lawn care company with three locations

in Ohio—but not in the way Palmer anticipated. "It's transformed my business," Palmer says. "It's about so much more than just marketing."

Implementing inbound marketing—the concept of winning customers' attention and drawing them to your website with useful, educational content—has prompted Weed Pro to rethink its mission, processes and people, too. Though change has been challenging at times, inbound marketing is a long-term game plan the company's leaders believe will pay off. In fact, after just 10 months Weed Pro more than doubled its website traffic, more than tripled the number of requests for program estimates and more than tripled its program sales (see chart on page 16).

IN THE KNOW

To understand how inbound marketing has changed Weed Pro, you first have to understand what it is. The term was reportedly coined by Brian Halligan,

the co-founder and CEO of HubSpot, an Internet marketing software company of which Weed Pro's now a customer.

Inbound marketing is analogous to "permission marketing," a term popularized by the Seth Godin book of the same name. These concepts contrast with so-called "interruption marketing," which refers to telemarketing, direct mail and other traditional forms of advertising that try to steal prospects' attention.

"People are tired of having messages pushed out at them," says Keith Gutierrez, CEO of Westlake, Ohio-based Structure Marketing, a consultant Weed Pro recruited last March to help put the full court press on its inbound marketing plans. "Inbound is really the way you'd prefer to be marketed to. You want to talk to your friends and family and do research on someone's website with the information provided on your own time."

continued on page 16

continued from page 15

Inbound marketing entails creating content to attract website traffic, converting website visitors to leads, turning leads into customers and retaining those customers by providing great service.

The tactics include search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing, blogging, social media and pay-per-click advertising (PPC). (See page 19 for more details on the inbound marketing process.) Weed Pro uses HubSpot software to manage all of these functions. Could a company execute the individual components without such software? Yes, Canary says, but the key for Weed Pro is its ability to track leads.

INTROSPECTION

It's also important to understand what inbound marketing is not, Palmer says. "It's not like when you do your direct mail campaign and then sit around

WEED PRO: INBOUNDED RESULTS

	2011	2012 (through Nov. 1)	% change
Website visits	9,951	25,973	+161%
Program estimate requests	166	537	+223%
No. of program sales	76	321	+322%
Program sales revenue	\$22,724	\$74,006	+226%

Note: Program is defined as a lawn care program with at least six applications during the season.

and wait six or seven months to see the results," he says. "It's an ongoing process. It's not hard; it's just a discipline."

Although Palmer says inbound marketing *tactics* aren't hard, that doesn't mean the process hasn't been difficult.

Once Canary and Gutierrez started executing inbound marketing techniques and launching individual campaigns, they realized there were some deeper changes that needed to be made in the

business, and they sat Palmer down behind closed doors to clue him in.

At its core, inbound marketing aims to make business communication more effective—and to deliver a better customer experience, Gutierrez says.

"That goes deeper than marketing and sales," he says. "Everyone in the organization needs to be involved—from the support staff to the technicians

continued on page 18

» WEB EXTRA

Visit the Web Extras section of LandscapeManagement.net to see the results of two Weed Pro inbound marketing campaigns (a summer up-sell opportunity and fall aerations).

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continued from page 16

to the management. We're trying to educate customers that they get more by working with Weed Pro. We need to make sure that's true."

As Canary says, "It's one thing to change your online marketing and talk about how you're different. But if you don't analyze from within and make sure every employee is engaged to deliver the experience you're promoting, then you're just lying."

That discussion piqued Palmer to revamp his mission statement and company values, taking cues from successful businesses like Zappos.com, whose CEO Tony Hsieh is known for saying he runs a customer service organization that happens to sell shoes.

"Lawn care is our service, but customer service is our product," Palmer says. "The question was, do we all believe that? I had to make some decisions on personnel to make sure

“LAWN CARE IS OUR SERVICE, BUT CUSTOMER SERVICE IS OUR PRODUCT ... I HAD TO MAKE SOME DECISIONS ON PERSONNEL TO MAKE SURE WE'RE NOT JUST TALKING THE TALK, BUT WE'RE WALKING THE WALK.” —ROB PALMER

we're not just talking the talk, but we're walking the walk."

Ultimately, he let go of three employees, one each in the sales, office and production departments. Each of those areas needed improvement for the company to meet its goals and live up to its new marketing strategy, Palmer says.

Another way Weed Pro's delivering on its message is training lawn technicians to better communicate with cus-



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tomers. "We're asking the tech to slow down," he says. "Talk to the customer before you do the lawn and talk to them again afterward, so they understand you're the expert and you're the one who can give them recommendations. We want to build credibility and trust. It's as much about retaining current customers as it is about bringing in new customers."

Delivering on what you've sold ultimately brings in new customers through referrals, Canary says. That's important because a referral is the least expensive method of acquiring a new client and it produces the best lifetime value. Weed Pro currently gets about 20 percent of its business from this method, but its goal is to hit 75 percent.

"We have a six-year lifespan on a referral client vs. about four-and-a-half years on all the others combined," Canary says. "If we can grow referrals, it makes a big difference."

Weed Pro is also developing a more robust agronomic training program and customer service/lawn tech cross-training initiative. And next season,

continued on page 21

HOW INBOUND MARKETING WORKS FOR WEED PRO

In inbound marketing, the sales process is all about the funnel.

1. VISITORS

At the top of the inbound marketing funnel, potential customers arrive at your website by way of blog posts, pay per click advertising, social media and other tactics. Weed Pro attracts site visitors with search engine-optimized blog posts, Google Adwords, Facebook interaction and YouTube videos (visit youtube.com/user/weedprollc to check out the videos).

3. SALES-ACCEPTED LEADS

Prospects who access additional materials, such as specific product- or service-related information, are considered sales-accepted leads, which means they may be ready to hear from you directly.

» WEB EXTRA

To learn more about inbound marketing, whether you're a novice or an expert, visit consultant Keith Gutierrez's inbound marketing "required reading" list in the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net).

2. MARKETING-QUALIFIED LEADS

Website traffic isn't the only goal. The goal is to generate leads and move customers "down the funnel" to convert those leads into sales.

So, once potential customers are on your site, a call to action prompts them to visit a specific landing page, which includes a form to gather contact information in exchange for an offer (think: whitepapers, how-to guides or webinars). Weed Pro offers include a Cleveland area lawn care calendar and a summer drought watering guide. Prospects who download educational information in exchange for their email addresses are considered marketing-qualified leads. They're prime candidates for sending further, relevant information via email, but they're not ready for a phone call.

4. CUSTOMERS

Ideally, the prospects at the bottom of the funnel are familiar with your company by now—thanks to the "lead-nurturing" process—and they're converted to customers.



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APP-ORTUNITY

The number of mobile users across various platforms and devices is staggering, says Rob Palmer, president and CEO of Weed Pro.

Consider this: In 2012, the U.S. saw a 55 percent increase in smartphone subscriptions to make for 98 million smartphone subscribers, according to comScore. That's nearly 42 percent of all U.S. mobile users. On top of that, 64 percent of mobile phone time is spent on apps, Nielsen reports.

So when Palmer's techy marketing director, Shaun Canary, came to him with the idea to launch a Weed Pro mobile app, he agreed it was the right move.

"It's a bridge to the future for me," Palmer says. "If businesses don't understand customer demographics, they will lose—they're already losing," he says.

The Weed Pro app, which has been available since Oct. 1 in the Apple App Store and the Android Market (now part of Google Play), was first developed by Canary himself in July, but he worked with Cleveland-based 529 App Solutions to revamp it in August. He underestimated how difficult it would be to place the app in Apple's App Store. Working with a mobile app developer eased that process and also gives him access to a user-friendly content management system (CMS) that allows him to easily change and update the app's features without redesigning the entire application. Canary says the company spent \$700 to develop the app, not including his time. Weed Pro pays \$50 per month for access to the CMS.

The free app includes a lawn ID guide that helps users identify common weeds and pests, a feed of the firm's YouTube videos and interactive features, like the ability to take a photo of a weed in your lawn and send it to Weed Pro for identification.

Since the app had only been available for about six weeks as of press time, it was too early to measure success. Canary says, "This, like our other informative guides, was made for visitors of our website to consume, use and share. We'll track the amount of downloads we receive, and how many of those prospects we were able to nurture into customers."

continued from page 18

Palmer's committed to hosting a weekly, companywide meeting to discuss field conditions and challenges, so everyone has a unified message.

IN VS. OUT

Speaking of costs, Palmer keeps a close eye on customer acquisition costs, and that's part of the reason he's sold on inbound marketing. Marketing experts say it's 60 percent cheaper to acquire a customer with inbound tactics vs. traditional marketing. (Consider that it costs Weed Pro \$90 to \$200 to reel in a customer through direct mail.)

But that doesn't mean Palmer's abandoning direct mail, despite his frustration that even the best direct mail pieces end up in the trash bin, unlike well-done blog posts that will

appear in web searches year after year.

Weed Pro will spend about \$50,000 on outbound marketing, including direct mail, in 2013—which is equal to what the company will spend on inbound marketing. For 2012, the spend ratio was 60/40 outbound to inbound. Canary emphasizes that the direct mail campaigns will drive customers to the web more so than in the past.

Now that the Weed Pro inbound marketing team's in place and the rebuilding year is behind him, Palmer looks forward to 2013. "What it comes down to is we're all spreading fertilizer and we're all spraying weeds," he says. He goes on to quote author Simon Sinek, who says, "People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it."

"With our inbound content, we hope we're answering the 'why' and providing people some value upfront," he says. **LMI**



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