Seeing is believing

3-D imaging software makes life easier, clients happier for Pennsylvania-based Plantique.

By EMILY SCHAPPACHER

When Brian Richardson shows his clients 3-D images of their landscape design projects, he says he can see the light bulbs go off inside their heads. They may ask for a few more trees by the garage or perhaps a longer retaining wall, and Richardson can show them what it would look like with just a few clicks of a mouse. He can even add in the sound of a bubbling waterfall and it's as if the clients are already enjoying their backyard oasis.

"Even though [before] we would present a detailed plan and show them examples of materials, it was very tough for the client to visualize exactly what it was going to look like," says Richardson, senior designer at Plantique in Allentown, Pa. "But now, by the time we get started, they have already seen a very good representation of what the design will be like, and I don't have to assume they understand what we are going to do."

With design/build

comprising 75 percent of Plantique's service mix, and with a customer base of 80 percent residential clients, the software has become an important sales tool for the $6.9 million company.

Richardson began seeing 3-D imaging software at trade shows and in trade publications about two years ago and knew Plantique needed to embrace the technology to stay competitive. After testing various programs, Plantique chose Realtime Landscaping Architect because it worked with its current estimating system. Other programs with 3-D capabilities include Pro Landscape, Dynascape and VisionScape.

Plantique started using 3-D regularly last March. The company has four software licenses, and spent about $5,500 initially to acquire the software. It also needed to add a plotter/scanner/copier to print designs to scale in color, which cost approximately $8,000.

SALES EFFICIENCY

Richardson says the software speeds up a client's decision-making process. Plantique has fewer mistakes and misunderstandings between clients and designers and fewer callbacks, as well. Sales meetings are more productive because the images decrease the amount of time designers need to spend explaining what the finished project will look like. Changes suggested by the client, which used to take a day or two to communicate through a hand drawing, can now be made in seconds during the very same meeting.

"It improves our efficiency because the client sees with their own eyes what they are getting," Richardson explains. "There will always be questions and changes on the fly, but many times it's nipped in the bud."

Like many types of technology, the software offers regular updates that enhance its performance. Over the past year, Plantique has installed updates that add the capability of including outdoor sounds, moving human figures and different neighborhood background settings, like mountain ranges or the countryside. Richardson says the updates are simple to install by just clicking on them when he receives a notice. But the updates, he adds, are one of the few simple aspects of the software for Richardson, 50, who says he's still trying to master the program. He's received help and training from some of Plantique's younger designers, who learned the program in school. Despite all the bells and whistles of 3-D imaging, he says he still believes in the importance of hand sketching. He often begins a sketch on paper and then scans it into the 3-D program to bring it to life.

Richardson advises contractors to communicate to clients that the 3-D images are "not exact representations, but very close approximations" of what the finished design will look like, as details like shapes, colors or material textures may vary in real life. But for Plantique, 3-D imaging has been a time-saving step in the right direction that Richardson says has placed the firm ahead of the curve.

"Hand drawing has worked well, but we knew it was going down this road," he says. "It's the wave of the future and it's only going to get better." LM

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.