

# Out with the old

A Washington firm streamlines operations with a marketing overhaul. *By EMILY SCHAPPACHER*

**T**hanks to a total revamp of his company’s marketing strategy, Rick Longnecker now knows his ideal clients are family-oriented homeowners in their late 30s to early 70s who have lived in their homes for at least 10 years. These clients aren’t looking for the best price but the best service and value they can get from trained professionals. Since uncovering this intel, life has been easier for the owner of Buds & Blades Landscape Co. in East Olympia, Wash.

“We were just beating our heads against the wall every spring,” Longnecker says. “We would have a flush of work come in to bid and we were either running around trying to do everything for everyone or we were taking work just to have work.

“It started to become clear that by doing certain types of jobs and working with certain types of customers we deliver a better product more consistently, and that just makes good business sense.”

Longnecker began analyzing his company’s practices at the end of the busy season last year. He evaluated

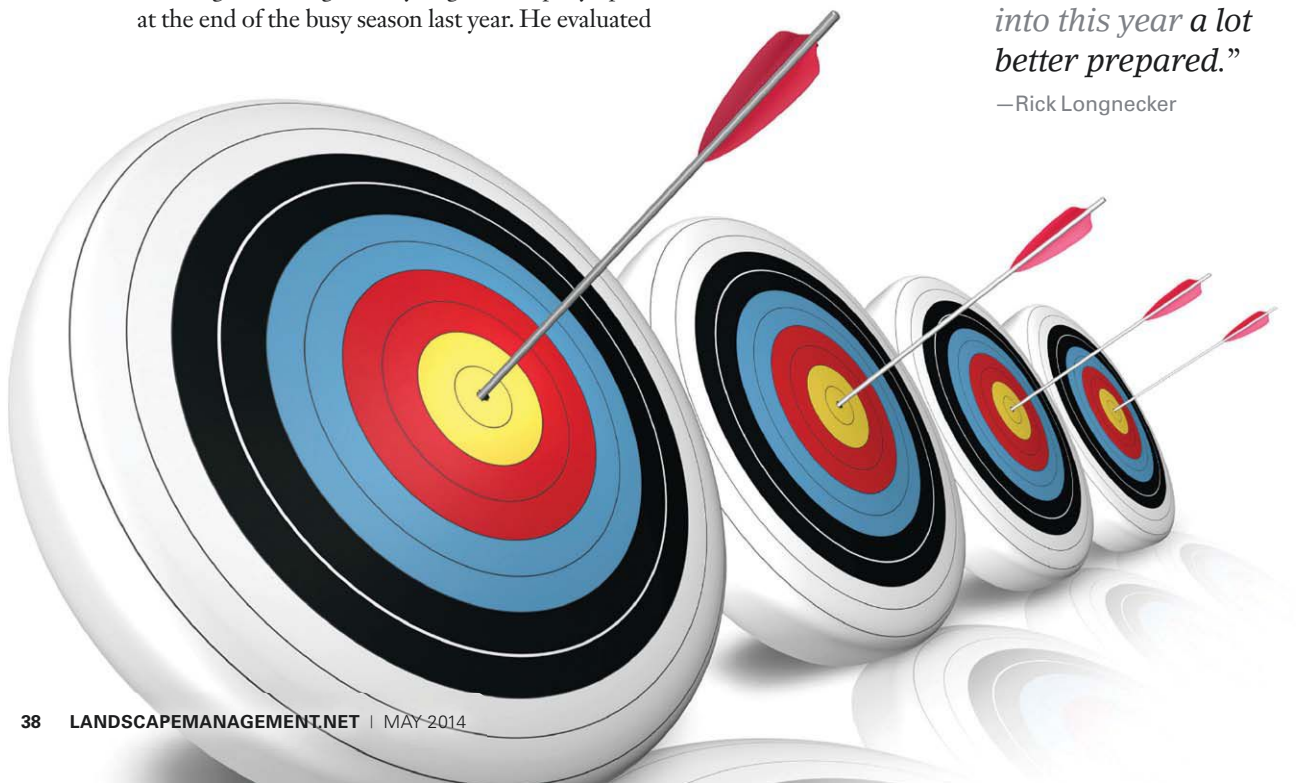
each step of his client interactions—from the initial phone call to collecting the check—and noticed similarities between accounts he thought were successful and accounts that weren’t. Longnecker also determined the design/build services his company offered did not make the best use of his crews’ time and skills, so he decided to strictly offer landscape maintenance to his 90 percent residential, 10 percent commercial clientele. Buds & Blades does about \$350,000 in annual revenue.

Once Longnecker had pinpointed the type of clients he wanted more of, he reworked his company’s messaging to speak directly to them. He spent a little more money on a fine-tuned direct



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—Rick Longnecker



## The Ticker: MAINTENANCE

Malvern, Pa.-based **Merit Service Solutions** acquired **SunTerra Landscape Services**, based in Austin, Texas. While terms of the deal weren't disclosed, SunTerra COO Judy McNew said the company hopes to expand nationally thanks to the acquisition. SunTerra, which is on track to hit \$14 million in 2014 revenue, hopes to jump to \$40 million annually within five years.

The **North American Equipment Dealers Association (NAEDA)** ranked **ECHO** and **Shindaiwa** at gold level status in its annual Manufacturer Relations Survey. The designation is determined by dealer

evaluation data exhibiting exceptional performances in product quality, technical support, parts availability, marketing and advertising support, among other categories.



**Exmark** published a new propane mower white paper, titled *Transitioning Mower Fleets to Propane*. Free for download at [Exmark.com/propanepower](http://Exmark.com/propanepower), the white paper provides background on propane-fueled

equipment, including the progression of engine technology, and details existing options for landscape maintenance professionals to switch to propane.

Laytonsville, Md.-based **Ruppert Landscape** acquired **A R Star Services**, which services Baltimore. The transaction includes the purchase



of select commercial contracts and equipment for sweeping—a service Ruppert has been looking to expand, said President Phil Key.

mail list and was more selective about the areas he reached out to. The firm's direct mail pieces now promote the fact that the company is locally owned and operated, telling clients how it can save them time and explaining the type of customer it wants to work with.

"Before, we would have sent something out that said: 'Here we are. Here's what we do. Call us for a quote.' And we would have picked a geographic area, sent out several thousand pieces and hoped for the best," Longnecker says. "Now we have dialed it down and are sending our customers direct mailings that connect with them."

### CUSTOMERS' VOICE

Longnecker then purchased memberships to Angie's List and Yelp to collect sales leads and see user-generated comments and reviews. He's testing both sites this season to determine which one works best for his company and will discontinue membership of the other at the end of the year.

"An unsolicited testimonial or review goes a long way, and fortunately

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for us the reviews have all been great so far,” Longnecker says. “I know sooner or later that bad review will come up. We will have to cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Buds & Blades also hired a marketing firm for help with sending email newsletters to a “tight and clean” list of about 500 current and potential customers six times a year.

Each email has two goals: to provide landscaping tips and to share company news. Longnecker says he often gets positive feedback on the emails, which have an average open rate of almost 60 percent, and even have helped recruit new clients.

“We have found this even works several months out,” Longnecker says. “It’s kind of like a drift effect—we keep sending information and, hopefully, we can eventually meet their needs.”

### BREAKING IT DOWN

Longnecker says the cost of his new marketing strategy was “not as much as you’d think.” The company spends roughly \$1,500 a year on a direct mail list. On top of that cost, each mailing it sends to the list costs \$1,500 to \$2,000. The company sends three or four mailings per year. Longnecker spends \$5,000 on memberships for Angie’s List and Yelp—a cost that will be cut in half when he drops one service—and \$255 per email newsletter. The company still plans to invest about \$3,000 to redesign its website and \$500 to \$750 to create a professional marketing video that will include client testimonials.

While Longnecker says it’s too early to quantify the results of his efforts, he says so far gross margins per job have gone up 5 percent to 10 percent due to increased pricing and

reduced labor costs. Additionally, total profit margins have increased at least 5 percent. Longnecker also is seeing the benefits of simplifying his service offerings. By sending the same guys with the same trucks and equipment to do similar jobs each day, the crew is quicker and more efficient, providing a better customer experience.

“We have seen a return on the front end by working with people who are going to buy and use our services and return on the back end because it’s a lot easier to manage and execute each job,” Longnecker says. “It’s been really great that we got started while things were fresh in our minds from last year. It has allowed us to go into this year a lot better prepared.”

*Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.*

## The Goods: MAINTENANCE

### JOHN DEERE MULCH ON DEMAND MOWER DECK

The Mulch On Demand (MOD) mower deck is now available in John Deere’s 2014 QuikTrak commercial mower lineup, which includes the 652R MOD and 652R EFI MOD models. Previously, the MOD was only available in the John Deere ZTrak line.

#### QUICK SWITCH

Convert from wide-open-side-discharge mode to a full-chambered mulching mode or any position in-between by holding down the electric switch located on the dash.



#### SITTIGHT

MOD allows an operator to switch between mulching and side discharging without leaving the mower.

#### SPEC IT OUT

The 652R MOD and 652R EFI MOD are equipped with seven-gauge, 52-in. decks.