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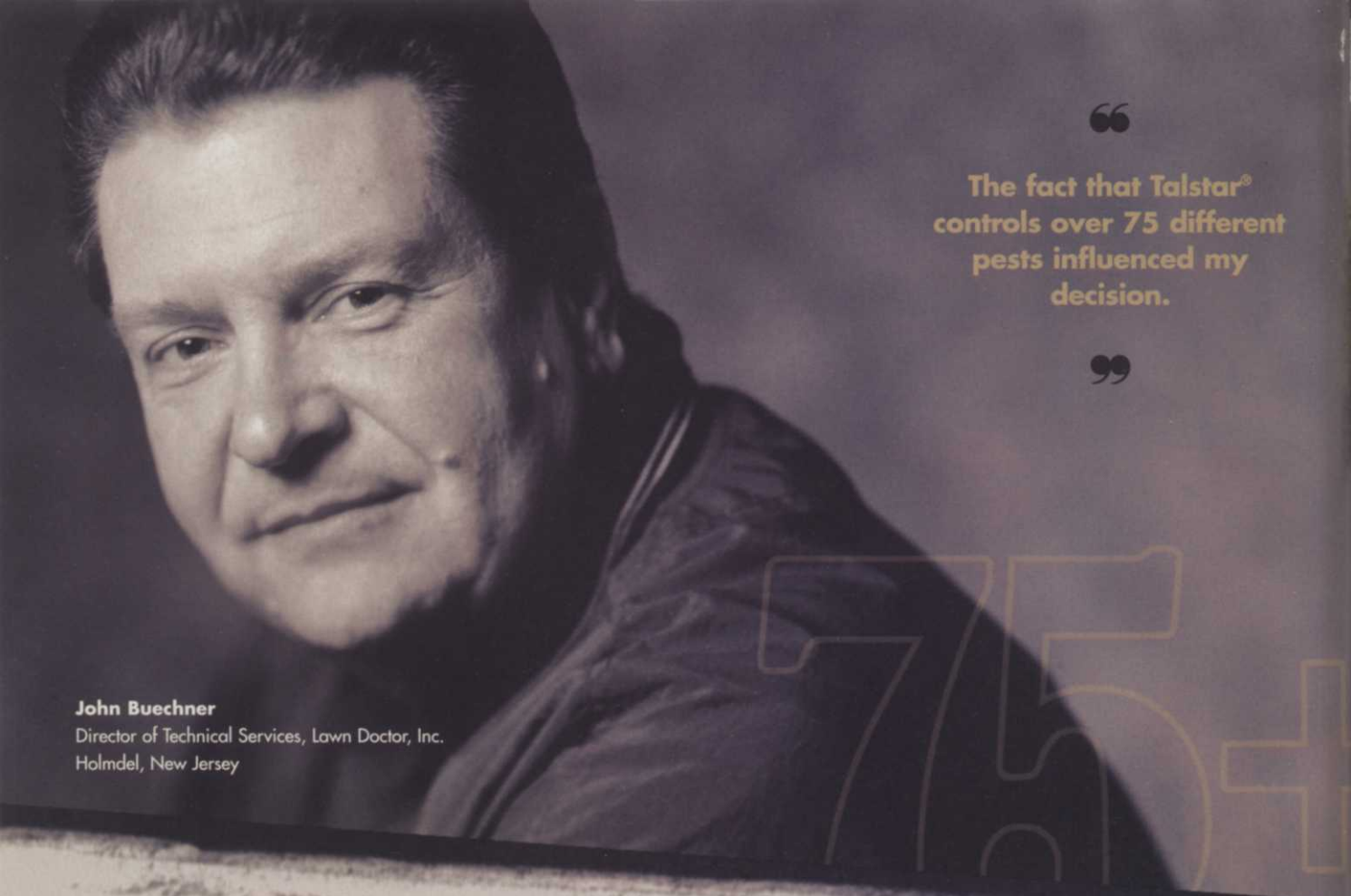
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32

Landscape MANAGEMENT

APRIL 2002 / #4 / VOLUME 41

features

cover story

32. Don't let lowballers bite into your profits

A guide to keep you from playing the "we'll beat any price" game in your marketplace

BY STEVE GREENWALD

38. Lighting it up

Contractors pool talents to give big GE property in NY ecologically sound landscape

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

43. Perfecting a park

The City of Portland has its own set of unique challenges in keeping Tom McCall Park shining

BY CURT HARLER / CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

irrigation center

50. Audit now, save later

Spring is a great time to check your systems

BY RON HALL

truck guide

53. Keep on truckin'

Successful contractors reveal the trucks that work for them, and their dream trucks, too

BY VICKY POULSEN

58. Hot wheels

Features that turn your truck into a lean, mean working machine

74. Mobile and agile ▶

Mobile accessories for trucks

grounds management center

76. Roche of Colorado Corporation

Keeping the bluegrass lush and green in Boulder, CO



58



76

COVER ILLUSTRATION: DAN BEEDY

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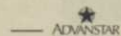
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departments

columns, news & more

9. On the Record

Always listen to your mom

By JASON STAHL

10. Inside the Owner's Head

Your computer a vital tool

By JASON STAHL

12. Let's Hear It

14. Industry Almanac

El Niño, new herbicides, Scotts makes another buy, leadership changes at Simplot

101. Events

Who, what and when

tech center

82. LM Reports: Aerate to the core ▲

By CURT HARLER

87. Solutions Center

Hire to grow, Homework overcomes objections

90. New insecticide options

These new target-selective insecticides give turf managers new hope in pest management

94. Products

ending notes

108. Best Practices

Payday for the owner





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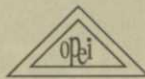
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Always listen to your mom

I can hear my mother's voice in my head. No, it's not the usual situation where there's no physical presence, just her words ricocheting around inside my cranium. I'm actually talking to her on the phone — at work, no less. She's telling me about a situation that's developed with her irrigation contractor. Apparently, she'd given the guy a down payment of \$1,500 to install a \$5,000 irrigation system and told him she wanted it installed before they went on vacation. Here it was, one week before their vacation, and she hadn't heard a peep from him.

"You're in the landscape business, can't you do something?" she pleaded.

"Whoa, whoa," I said. What was I supposed to do, put a mugshot of this guy on the cover of the magazine with a caption that read, "Wanted: Dead or Alive"? My mother has never quite understood exactly what *Landscape Management* is all about, but maybe now was the time to explain it to her in detail.

"Mom, the purpose of this magazine is to —"

"You know, I called that guy's secretary and told her I want my money back right now," she said, her voice reaching a feverish pitch. "Not only that, I told her I was going to call the local television news and report them."

Now I felt sympathetic toward this guy. No longer would I question why certain landscape and irrigation contractors choose to make commercial work their primary focus.

"You know, mom, those guys are backlogged beyond belief right now, and —"

"But he didn't even call me back!" she cried.

And it hit me. He may have looked at her as a nag-

ging customer, but she was definitely in her right to demand action. I was willing to bet this guy wasn't a *Landscape Management* subscriber. If he were, he undoubtedly would have read countless articles about how customer service is so important, and how you should always stay in touch with customers. With all the modes of communication in existence these days, there's absolutely no excuse not to return a client's call. If he had, even if it was to tell her that he wouldn't be able to install the system before the vacation, she at least wouldn't have suspected that he'd run off with her money.

There's a few lessons in all of this:

► Always respond to your customers' e-mails, phone calls or pages. It really doesn't take that much time, especially if you make it brief. It lets them know you're still alive, at least.

► Follow through on your promises but if you can't at least call and explain why. Then tell them when you will be able to start the project so your customer won't go ballistic.

► Don't mess with hotheaded Irish women.

Well, that last statement is probably unfair, not to mention stereotypical. Maybe it should read: Don't create your own headaches. That's exactly what this guy did, and what you should avoid doing.

Contact Jason at 440/
891-2623 or e-mail at
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If he had just once returned her phone call, she at least wouldn't have suspected that he'd run off with her money.



inside the owner's head

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

Your computer: a vital tool

It's often heard in this business, and it always amazes knowledgeable operators. A landscape or lawn care company owner says he's never had a budget, or doesn't know what his costs are. Chances are his business isn't computerized or, if it is, he doesn't understand what it should do for him.

Bob Maffei of Maffei Landscape, Marston Mills, MA, is a smart owner, but even he admits he's traveled a long road with his computer systems and it's taught him a thing or two along the way.

"If you're just starting things or only have one or two machines, you're in luck," Maffei says. "Do all you can to research your software and your vendor. Changes are not so easy to implement as you travel further down the road."

Maffei describes his initial hardware choices as "just plain poor." He relied too much on information he received from local computer dealers.

Tips for starting a computer system right

- ▶ Research software
- ▶ Research vendor
- ▶ Learn how to use it well
- ▶ Know your business
- ▶ Be prepared to upgrade in future
- ▶ Have a plan to back up important data

"Think big," Maffei advises. "Find a top-notch dealer and run away...far away from the mom and pop or 'I do computers at night' guys."



Bill Gerhardt says computer training is priority number one.

more," he says. "We're always struggling with getting everyone up to speed."

A vital tool

Computers are a vital tool in all industries today and landscaping is no exception, although some people still want to believe they can do without them.

"When I started my business 20 years ago I never thought or pictured myself using the computer this much," says Bruno Pillari of Pillari Brothers, Howell, NJ. "My advice to the new entrepreneur is to learn to use it proficiently."

Pillari says you'll also be able to maximize the benefit your computer system offers by knowing your business. "Think about the ways you'll be using the computer," he says. "Think about everything — financial information, tracking and accountability, communication, scheduling. Then do your homework. They're all part of the company."

Bill Gerhardt of GreenScapes Landscape Architects and Contractors says he'd do things differently too if he was starting over.

"I would spend more time on training our managers on using the software



Bob Maffei tells new computer owners to do their homework.



Back up your server or you'll be sorry, says Heather Schuster.

Be ready for change

As important as it is to start off on the right foot with computer systems, it's equally important to make necessary changes as your company grows and changes.

"When starting fresh with a computer system, think of the process as ever-changing," advises Heather Schuster of Terra-Firma Landscape, Muskego, WI. "Budget every year for upgrades in software, hardware and 'userware' (education). Don't freak out like I do that computers have built-in obsolescence — you'll only make yourself nuts."

Schuster makes a good point that the more you rely on computers, the more vulnerable you are to data loss. That's why she has what she calls "triple redundancy." "Our server has a mirrored hard drive, and we back up the server to two different tape backups every night. We also have a battery power protector that shuts down the server in case of an extended power outage."

— Information provided by the Owners' Network, www.owners1.com, a program of JP Horizons.