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BROWSE ROOMS ▾

THE INS & OUTS OF houzz

This online platform may give residential landscape designers and design/build firms a boost.

BY **DIANNA BORSI O'BRIEN**

Matthew Cunningham of Boston-based Matthew Cunningham Landscape Design knows why he's smitten with **Houzz.com**, a free, online visual portfolio that links professionals like him to homeowners seeking to improve their homes, inside or outside.

Having promoted his business on the website for 18 months now, Houzz has brought Cunningham five new clients and projects diverse in scope and style. Cunningham marvels that for one project he acquired through the website, he developed a complete master plan for a home in Maine, even though the client was based in Texas. That arrangement may sound like a logistical nightmare, but Cunningham says Houzz made it easy for him to see what his Texas clients wanted based on the examples saved in their Houzz accounts.

What's Houzz?

Essentially, it's an online platform that connects homeowners to designers and home improvement professionals. Founded in 2009, Houzz was founded by a husband and wife who were renovating their home and grew frustrated

HOW TO SAY HOUZZ

The "Hou" in Houzz is pronounced "how"—Houzz is a combination of the words "house" and "buzz."

at the lack of tools for finding good ideas and professionals to get the job done. So they developed their own. A year later, they quit their day jobs. Houzz grew more than 450 percent in 2012 to 12 million monthly unique users. In late January, the site launched Houzz Pro+, a paid marketing program for professional users, which has sold out in several major markets.

The site itself is free and anyone can create a profile, upload images or gather ideas or inspiration. Once visitors create an account, they also can create “Ideabooks,” where they may stash photographs for later reference and keep them private or public. For homeowners, it puts an end to tearing out magazine pictures to share with designers and contractors. For professionals, it provides inspiration, a glimpse into clients’ desires and a way to share design ideas.

When professionals upload images of their work to Houzz, those photos are linked directly back to their profiles, making it easy for viewers to find out more about the service providers—and access their contact information once they’re ready to make their move. The site also includes discussion boards and places for professional-homeowner interaction.

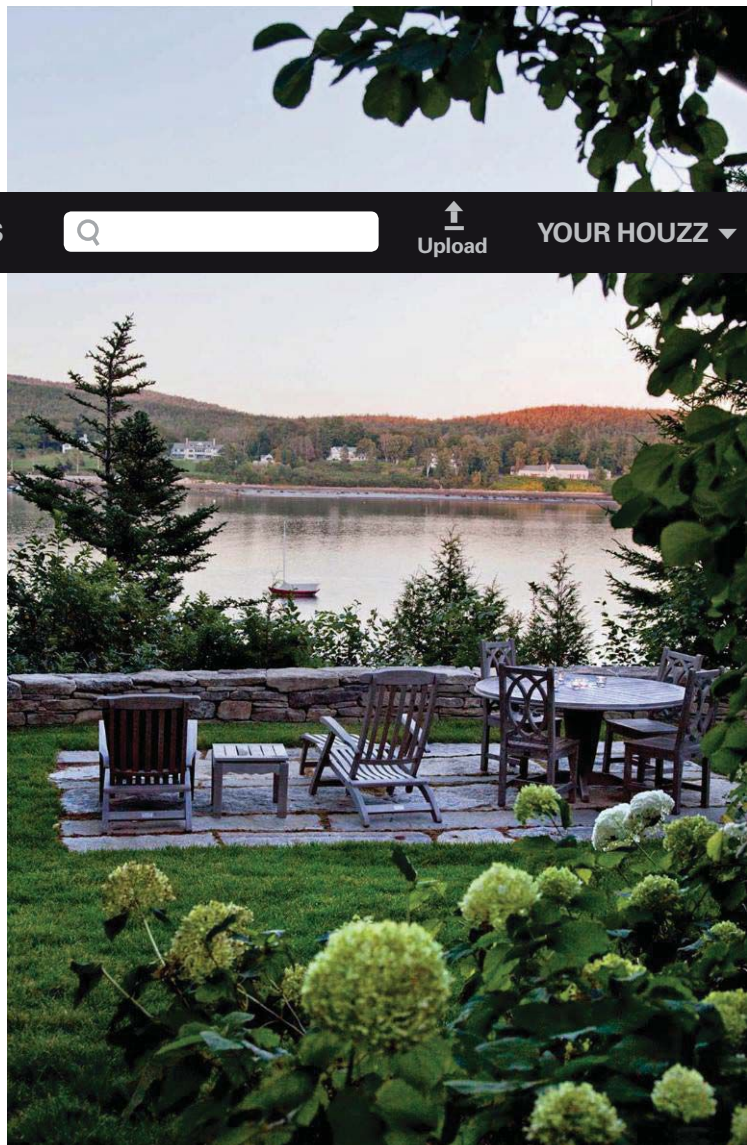
Who visits Houzz? According to the site, 89 percent of its viewers are homeowners with an average home value of \$450,000. Research shows these viewers plan to spend \$5,900 on a deck or porch addition or alteration within two years and \$7,600 on a patio or landscape addition or replacement.

Should you use Houzz?

As of press time, there were nearly 13,700 landscape contractors and 4,600 landscape architects/designers with professional profiles on Houzz. The site may be useful for any Green Industry professional who has excellent photos of its work—but it shines when it comes to spotlighting designers and design/builders.

Luckily, professionals don’t need to be tech savvy to use Houzz. Jamyn Simonik is the point person for Houzz at Smalls Landscaping in Valparaiso, Ind. She calls it “easy peasy” and not time consuming, unless you fall into the black hole of searching the site’s more than 1 million images. She estimates she spends 30 minutes a week on updates and says if you know enough to put .com at the end of an email, you can use Houzz.

Even Cunningham, who prefers to do his individual master plan drawings by hand on paper for each of the 20 to 30 residential projects he does each season, finds the site user friendly. But make no mistake: The site is about images,



East Coast-based landscape designer Matthew Cunningham has met clients from across the country via Houzz.

Opposite: Smalls Landscaping, which designs and builds residential landscapes in Indiana, appointed CAD specialist Jamyn Simonik to strengthen its Houzz presence.

and that’s where Cunningham has a leg up; he’s a photographer as well as a landscape designer.

Those with excellent photographs have an advantage because it’s more likely viewers will “save” them or comment on them. The site’s algorithm also takes into account keywords, descriptions, comments, questions and the presence of price tags, says Liza Hausman, vice president of community at Houzz. All of these factors drive a firm’s images to the front page of the site, thus exposing the professional’s name to the forefront of homeowners’ views.

Many uses

Karen Chapman, owner of Seattle-based firm Le Jardin, which specializes in residential container and small

ON THE WEB

garden design, was too busy to look into Houzz until she was asked to write for the site in September as its Pacific Northwest regional garden writer. The coauthor of *Fine Foliage*, a soon-to-be-published book on ways to combine foliage in gardens and containers, Chapman writes for Houzz, turning out Ideabooks on topics related to landscaping in the Northwest, container gardening and color-focused design. Once she took a look at the site, Chapman says she was thrilled with its resources. She taps Houzz to create “look at this” Ideabooks for clients. Chapman says it’s better than showing a client an on-site slide show, partly because they may view it anytime they want to, even “11 p.m. at night.”

Like Chapman, Nancy Marshall, co-owner of Smalls Landscaping, a winner of

For **8 tips** on getting started with and making the most of Houzz.com, check out p. 36.



Smalls Landscaping won a Best of Houzz 2013 Customer Satisfaction award, which is based on homeowner ratings.

a Best of Houzz 2013 Customer Satisfaction award—uses the site for inspiration, discovery and to display the company’s mainly residential work.

She first took a look at the site after a client told her about it. “I was blown away,” she says. “Four hours later, I

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HOW TO USE

Getting started on **Houzz.com** and making the most of this free, online visual portfolio is easy—if you know how. Start with these tips.



The first step is creating a profile on Houzz, like Matthew Cunningham's above.

Opposite: Karen Chapman, owner of design firm Le Jardin et, writes and creates Ideabooks for Houzz.

1 DON'T BE AFRAID. Dive in to creating a profile, and if problems crop up, Houzz offers free resources, videos and tutorials, including how to take the photographs you'll need to get noticed. If online help isn't for you, real people answer the telephone at Houzz and they're willing to help.

2 START WITH GREAT IMAGES. Remember Houzz is a visual portfolio. Liza Hausman, vice president of community for Houzz, recommends uploading at least 10 images. A primary way your company's images rise to the top of the site is based on how often they're added to Ideabooks. The more beautiful your images, the more likely they are to be added to others' Ideabooks. If you

don't have sharp images, get them, advises Ken Lewis of ClientExpander, an internet marketing firm. If the cost is holding you up, he suggests turning to Craigslist.org or a local college to find an aspiring photographer. He also suggests bartering with a professional photographer to get good images of your work. "If the image is not crisp and clear, no one is going to put it in their Ideabook," he says.

3 USE IMAGES YOU ALREADY HAVE. But make sure they are yours to use. Many firms have photographs of past projects already sitting on their shelves, but Brianne Dawson, marketing manager of Marketri, says ensure you own the rights to them. If the images were taken by a photographer outside of your firm, in addition to gain-



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ing permission to use them, you may want to offer him or her a photo credit for the images via a small watermark.

4 WRITE GREAT CAPTIONS.

They should tell a story and add context, Lewis says. A good caption hooks viewers and makes it more likely they'll share the image and add it to their Ideabooks. Include keywords in the captions, as they also can raise your ranking.

5 ASK CLIENTS TO WRITE REVIEWS.

And make it easy for them. Lewis suggests handing out business cards at the end of successful jobs, thanking them and asking specifically for a review on Houzz (don't forget to include a direct URL). You even can offer to write something yourself and ask them to approve it. Such testimonials give you online credentials and as Dawson notes, "People love to read testimonials and people trust them. When they trust you, they'll reach out to you when they're ready to do business."

6 ASK FRIENDS, FAMILY AND CLIENTS TO ADD YOUR IMAGES TO THEIR IDEABOOKS.

Don't be shy. Remember, the formula for top ranks includes how many Ideabooks your images are added to.

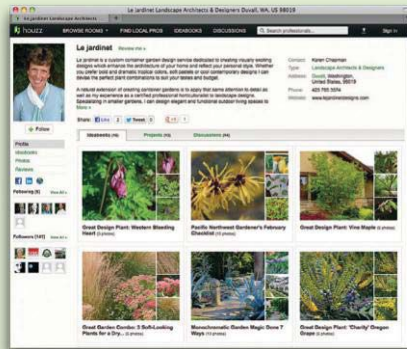
7 BE PROACTIVE, ENGAGE AND PARTICIPATE.

Your profile on Houzz gets a boost through your interaction. Give yourself a leg up by getting involved in communities and discussions and by sharing your expertise. Dawson suggests looking for questions

you can answer. This interaction gives homeowners insight into how you work and your personality. And if they like your attitude, they'll be more likely to contact you. Designate a person or set time aside to steer your Houzz activity. At Smalls Landscaping, Houzz point person Jamyn Simonik uploads new photographs and keeps tabs on user questions. Matthew Cunningham of Matthew Cunningham Landscape Design sets time aside at the end of each day to answer questions and such, which he can do from anywhere via the site's mobile apps.

8 CONSIDER A PROFESSIONAL.

Rather work outdoors than on a computer? Those who are unsure about navigating the site may want to enlist an expert, says Lewis. If you decide to go pro for your Houzz efforts, make sure the consultant has expertise with Internet marketing and search engine optimization for your type of business—and that he or she's not learning on *your* job.



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ON THE WEB

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was addicted.” The firm, with \$3 million in annual revenue, prides itself on unusual designs, and Houzz gives Marshall and her partner and sister, Becky Whitacre, easy access to the unique plants and ideas they like.

“We like to think way outside the box,” says Whitacre. One of her first searches was for visual ideas for building a “Hobbit house” landscape. A train garden was another focus for a Houzz search.



Landscaper designer Matthew Cunningham says Houzz makes good design “relevant.”

Smalls has been using Houzz for less than a year, but Simonik, the CAD specialist who keeps the company’s Houzz

profile and Ideabooks updated, says it’s worth the time spent even if a user hasn’t garnered business directly from it yet.

“It’s exactly what we do,” she says. “We’re a design firm and it lets clients see what we do and it helps clients decide what they want.”

It also saves the firm time on the telephone, says Simonik. Instead of answering those random questions, such as “when should trees be trimmed,” many of those answers are either available on Houzz or Smalls can answer a client’s questions easily through the site.

Cunningham also appreciates the ability to connect with clients and answer questions from anywhere, anytime.

“It has made my connections with clients stronger,” he says. He values the site as an advertising medium more so than regional print magazines. He predicts the site will give the landscape design/build industry a boost by helping clients realize the importance of design and landscaping—and getting the job done right the first time.

“Houzz makes the importance of design relevant and shows people what a good designed space looks like,” says Cunningham. **L.M.**

O’Brien is a freelance writer based in Columbia, Mo. She is now addicted to Houzz.

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IRRIGATION

Water reincarnated

Use of recycled water in landscaping is slowly catching on, researchers say.

By BETH GERACI

When Rain Bird's 2013 Intelligent Use of Water Summit took place in January at Michigan State University, the focus was on water conservation in the golf course and sports turf industries. But that doesn't mean there weren't takeaways for landscape contractors.

A speaker at the event, University of California researcher Ali Harivandi, Ph.D., urged golf course superintendent attendees to consider using reclaimed water—water that's treated and cleaned at sewage treatment plants—instead of potable water for irrigation in the face of a worldwide water shortage.

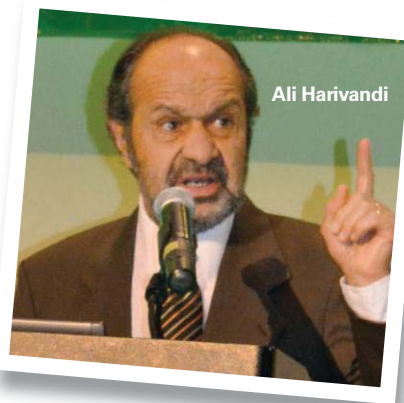
It's a growing trend in the golf course industry, and in a recent phone interview, Harivandi told *LM* that it's slowly catching on in the commercial landscaping business too, especially out West.

All you need is for a pipeline to run from the sewage treatment plant to someplace near the commercial property and you're in business. And in states such as California, Florida, Texas and Colorado, "they're getting more into it," Harivandi said. "As people learn more about it and

the infrastructure is built and as treatment plants remove more salt from the water, within 30 years I wouldn't be surprised to see that all the water in Los Angeles Basin were being reused."

Sewage treatment plants are highly regulated by a government or quasi-government body, Harivandi said, and the water is disinfected heavily by chemicals or different types of gases. Still, reclaimed water use in the commercial landscaping industry is problematic on two levels, he stressed. For one, the infrastructure to irrigate with it in many cases has yet to be built. And not many sewage treatment plants remove saline from the water, because doing so is expensive and requires much energy and fossil fuel use.

Because commercial landscapes generally are home to a diversity of plants, shrubs, flowers and turf that have different levels of saline tolerance, irrigating them with reclaimed water is complicated. On the other hand, if the water is going to a golf course where the acreage is all turfgrass, "it's more straightforward than if it goes to a mixed landscape or botanic garden where plants have different salt tolerances," Harivandi said.



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IRRIGATION Reclaimed water use in landscaping is on the rise

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DESIGN/BUILD One owner finds the perfect work/life balance

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MAINTENANCE Lawn clippings do have their benefits

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LAWN/TREE CARE Meet Ohio's Applicator of the Year

FLORIDA WATER SURVEY SAYS...

Despite the challenges, a new survey out of Florida shows Floridians are interested in recycled water use, too—residentially.

The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences conducted a water survey in December, the results of which were released last month.

The survey, which had nothing to do with the Rain Bird Summit, was done on behalf of the Gainesville-based Center for Public Issues Education (PIE Center). It asked nearly 500 residents for their views on 16 water-related topics.

"We were pleasantly surprised by the water conservation efforts Floridians are willing to make," said Alexa Lamm, an assistant professor at the University of Florida, who headed up the survey.

The survey showed that 65.3 percent of respondents were willing to use recycled wastewater for irrigation—more than administrators expected. But only 20.3 percent of them said they have access to recycled wastewater. Survey results did not indicate what type of recycled wastewater residents do or don't have access to, however.

"We're hopeful that if decision makers know that the public is willing to use [recycled wastewater], they'll be more proactive in trying to make it more readily available," said Lamm of the encouraging results. "We're always optimistic. Any time you can provide research-based information, hopefully that can influence decision making."

DESIGN/BUILD

Finding *balance*

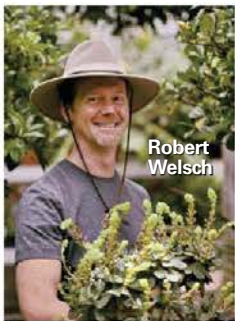
Instituting a few changes improved business—and quality of life—for one Green Industry owner.

By MARISA PALMIERI



In 2010, Robert Welsch was “dog tired and chasing every lead.” The year before, his landscape design/build firm, Westover Landscape Design in Tarrytown, N.Y., had lost money for the first time since opening its doors in 2004. Welsch felt like he was spinning his wheels and knew he needed to make some changes.

The first step was clarifying Westover’s position in its (high-end) market. The company, which declined to disclose its annual revenue, has a 98 percent residential client base just outside of New York City. Typical projects are \$25,000 and up. Welsch, with the help of Green Industry consultant Jeffrey Scott, was able to institute some changes that drastically improved his company’s net profit and average sale size, while decreasing the owner’s stress level and time spent on the business. Finding that balance was enlightening for Welsch, a former publishing executive for whom landscaping is a second career.



Robert Welsch

A few tweaks, including the ones detailed below, helped Westover and Welsch find balance and boost business.

1 Prequalifying leads. Before, Welsch was working about 80 hours a week during the season (April to June), and was meeting, in person, with most prospects, “chasing anything and everything.” Now, his business partner prequalifies all leads over the phone, explaining the company’s process and walking them through a questionnaire. That checklist includes questions covering budget and scope, whether the prospect ever has worked with a designer before and his or her address. “We look it up right away on Zillow.com to determine the neighborhood and size of the property,” he says. “If they just want a few shrubs moved, we’re not the right firm for them,” he says, explaining the company now refers those who aren’t a good fit elsewhere. “I don’t want to waste their time or my time, either.”

2 Setting parameters on prospect meetings. “Now we only do new client meetings on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and never more than three in a day,” Welsch says. “When those

slots are full, I don’t care who the client is, we’re putting them off.” The company now knows it can process only nine follow-ups and proposals per week with its current infrastructure, so setting a limit and choosing only prospects who seem like the right fit has helped eliminate chaos. “Before, I was doing meetings all week—probably 15 a week. I was doing proposals late at night and at 6 a.m. It was unsustainable,” he says.

3 Changing the subcontracting process. Westover used to handle masonry estimates and billing, even though it subcontracted out the work. “It was a tremendous amount of back and forth,” Welsch says. “Now, we’re agnostic. We have a variety of masons we work with, and we bring them on and introduce them to clients and we cut ourselves out as the middle man.” Doing so has freed up a lot of time for Welsch. “We have high standards in the quality of work we do and our clients love our subs,” he says. “If anyone doesn’t give Westover quality, they’re out.”

4 Adding bench strength. Previously, Welsch was the only one doing estimates. Since reorganizing, he’s added two landscape designers who also serve as project managers. They join him on sales calls, and after the fact they own the projects through their life cycles.

5 Adding recurring revenue. Westover used to be 100 percent design/build; today 5 percent of the firm’s business comes from a fine gardening service it created over the last two years. Adding this division was a way for the company to bring in a new revenue stream, take care of its current clients’ needs and nurture relationships with them that may lead to referrals.

Of all the changes, Welsch says not chasing every lead was the most difficult thing to get used to. “As a small business owner, you get very hungry and you always think it’s going to dry up,” he says. But today Welsch works about 60 hours a week during the season—a 25 percent drop from before. That’s not bad for a company that’s improved net profit 100 percent and increased its average sales size by 45 percent over the last two years.