

Landscape Company Web Design 101

What you should be doing on the net, and more importantly, what you shouldn't be doing!

By Dan Antonelli, President & Creative Director, LandscaperMarketing.com & Graphic D-Signs, Inc., 908-835-9000

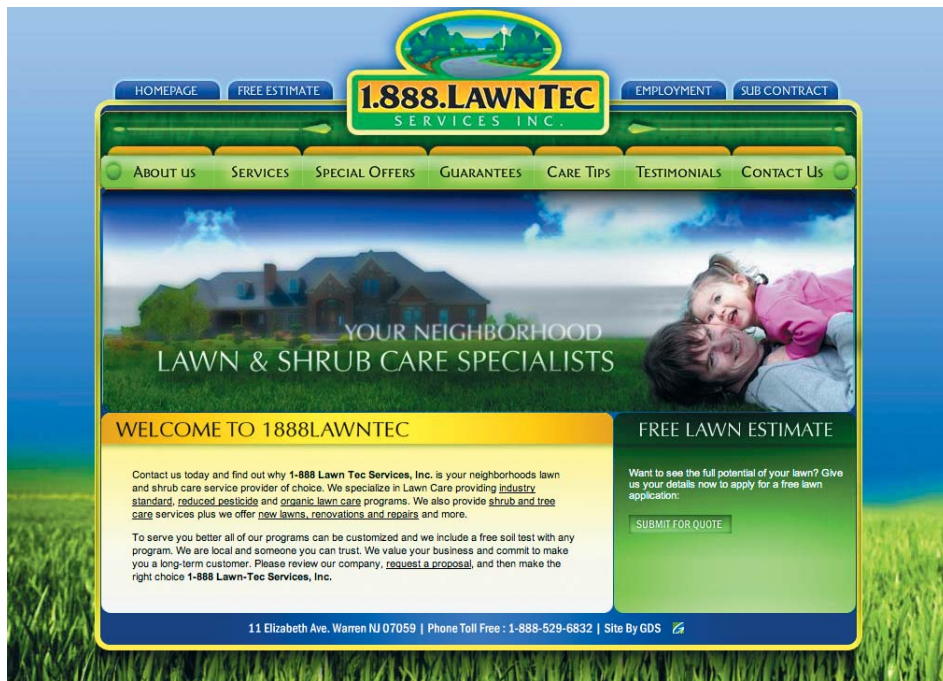
What to look for when making the leap to put your company on the net.

Still don't have your landscape company on the internet? Tired of telling your customers that you don't have a web site? Or maybe you have a web site - but it's not working for you. There's no better time to revisit the issue of whether or not you should be on the net. But first, you need to be aware of what works, and what doesn't - as well as what a site can and can't do for your landscape business.

What a site probably won't do for you.

The biggest misconception most landscape contractors have is that once they get a web site, that somehow, it's going to be bringing in a lot of business on its own. The reality is that most landscapers want to stay within a 50-75 mile range of their home town. This limits the effectiveness of search engines, since most customers might search using more broad terms (ie. 'landscaping nj', or 'new jersey landscape contractors'.) The problem is that you may get leads outside of your area. So, your search engine strategy has to be very narrow and region-specific in focus.

But make no mistake, a properly optimized site can and will bring in leads, and should pay for itself quickly. Ranking #1 on Google for a search phrase like



It's hard to compete against franchise-type lawn services with an amateur approach to online marketing. For this company, (www.1888lawntec.com) their online presence reflects a professional, franchise-like feel, while providing potential clients a clear understanding of their lawn and shrub care services.

'NJ Landscape Contractors' means that your link will be in front of thousands of potential clients during the course of a year.

What your site should do.

Your site, first and foremost, should establish your company as a reputable, professional organization. It should make it easy for potential customers to quickly look through your work and establish a positive impression of your firm. With that in mind, it should also help eliminate the wrong kind of clients just as it should reel in the right kind of clients.

For most of the landscape company sites we've designed thus far, we were presenting work from higher-end companies that produce truly outstanding work. So, as a viewer, if that's the

kind of work you're seeking, it will be very obvious that you've come to right company. On the flip side, if you're looking for a cheaper landscape firm, you may believe you're at the wrong place. In practice, this works well as a tool especially when a potential client is on the phone and inquiring about your service. You can point them to the site, and they'll immediately get a sense for what you do. It's also helpful, if you get cornered about pricing options. You can have the potential client view the portfolio section of your site and give price ranges for actual jobs completed.

The time you'll save is immeasurable. You'll weed out the tire-kickers, and bring in the people to pay the right money for your work.

Here's some points to consider, as well as common pitfalls to avoid when planning your online presence.

1. Designing Your Own Web site

Sure, you're very creative - and you're great on the computer. Why not design your own web site? You bought Frontpage or maybe even the industry standard web design program, Dreamweaver. This web stuff looks pretty easy. Well, just like the clients who think laying down brick pavers must be pretty easy - clearly, there's an awful lot involved in building a good marketing tool for you firm. Of the many sites we've seen that were designed by their owners, the overwhelming majority exhibit a lack of professionalism that speaks poorly about their business. As a business that's selling the importance of a neat, professional job and installation, it's ironic that many landscape companies overlook this and present an image that is often amateurish. After some 200 web sites under our belt here, we're still learning everyday the nuances necessary to built cohesive and functionally sophisticated web sites.

Additionally, here's a few other points to consider. Designing your own site is a poor use of your resources. The learning curve is extremely steep. Not only does trying to build it yourself cost you money, the end result will not be as good as hiring a professional.

2. Hiring your (nephew, friend, kid out of college, guy who's good on computers) to design your site

Perhaps you've established that designing your own web site is a bad idea. You realize that you're going to have to pay someone to do it. What about that kid you know in college taking web design classes? He's going to be real cheap!

The theory of this sounds great - get a cheap web site built for much less than a professional would charge. And what generally

happens? You get a web site that may be functional, but fails to deliver the strategic marketing objectives of your business. Perhaps there's no Search Engine Optimization (SEO) included. It's doubtful they understand your business, how it works, and what you're trying to communicate.

"We originally had the phone company design our web site as part of yellow page advertising." says Kurt Bongiovani of GA Landscape Design. (www.galandscape.com) "Then we realized it didn't reflect who we we're or what we're trying to present as a company, to our prospective clients." Kurt then called us, and we "took him to the next level" as he likes to say. "The response has been phenomenal. Although the site was quite expensive, it took about a month to pay for itself, with the leads we started to get, and the jobs we closed."

As with everything, you tend to get what you pay for. For your web site, you might be better off paying to do it right the first time, than throwing away your money, only to again pay later for it to get it done the right way.

3. Failure to develop a marketing plan for the web site.

You'll hear from some people who have had a site built complain that it's not generating any leads or sales. Building a site, and marketing a site are two different things. You can't expect that once the site is up, that suddenly Google's going to make you number one for 'landscape designer California' Your web designer should be advising you on a marketing program designed to generate traffic to your site. This is a separate component, and might consist of a paid placement strategy with the major search engines, in addition to traditional search engine optimization techniques. A good rule of thumb here is to really look for actual search engine results from the

Figure 1.

Once the site is built, its time to market it. Here's a few quick tips on marketing your new site:

Paid Search Engine: Placement: A paid strategy might entail paying to have your site listed on the top of the search engine for various search terms, under the 'sponsored links' category. This allows you to set a budget per month, and you are charged per-click when someone goes to your site from the search engine. Very effective, but can get expensive the broader the term. You are able to target the reach to specific regions.

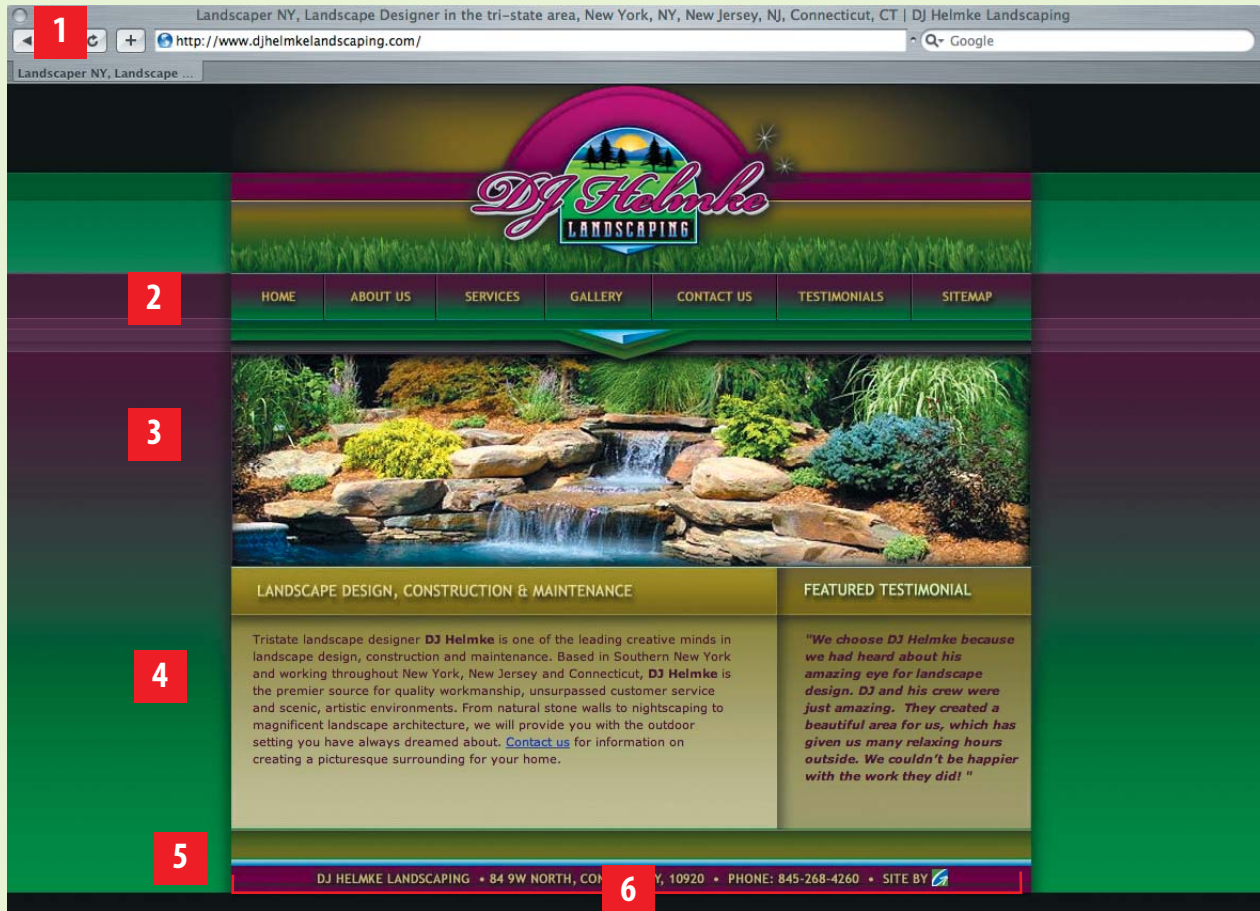
Your answering machine: If no one is there to answer your phone, make sure they can at least immediately get more information. Make sure your message states that they can visit you online for more information.

Stationery & Business Cards: Change everything that goes out of your office to now also include your website address.

Vehicle: Make sure your shop trucks contains the web site. People are more likely to remember the web address than a phone. The back of the vehicle is especially important.

Meetings: Encourage your prospects to visit your site before you do a site visit. This will immediately set the tone for the type of company they are dealing with, and presumably will give you a big leg up on the competition if your site looks professional.

Figure 2. Anatomy of a successful landscape web site design



- 1 Page Title.** The page title contain relevant keywords and phrases that will help with the search engine ranking.
- 2 Easy navigation.** We kept this as simple as possible. About Us, Services, Gallery, Contact Us, Testimonials, and a Sitemap (which helps for search engines).
- 3 Flash element.** We wanted to use flash to create some visual excitement on the site while being able to highlight one of their best jobs. The intro has some audio, with a bird the 'pulls' the image in - and we created a faux waterfall movement.
- 4 Keyword Density.** Its important to place as many keywords in HTML (not graphics which can't be read by search engines) on the home page. Here we placed within the copy terms which we think people would use to find a company like this.
- 5 Address and Contact Info.** This information appears on every page throughout the site. You don't want visitors to work to find out how to contact you.
- 6 Page Width.** In general, it is still a good idea to have your site designed for 800 pixels wide, although you want to also make sure the site looks pleasing on larger monitors. We use sophisticated background fills to insure the site looks good on larger monitors with higher resolutions settings.

design firm you are considering hiring. (See Figure 1).

4. Poor navigational structure.

The site needs to contain a logical flow and hierarchy. There's certain things viewers expect to see. Your site isn't the place to try cute ways to have people navigate through. The site should be as succinct as possible, and present the information in a cohesive, logical manner. It should be easy for people to contact you (that information should be on every page). Nothing on the site should be more than 3 clicks away from finding. (See Figure 2)

5. Copywriting is not professional.

Contrary to the common myth that 'no one reads anything – they just look at the pictures' – you'll want to make sure the wording on the site is polished and professional, and speaks on the level of your target audience. While you may know what 'compacted underlayment for brick pavers' is, don't assume your audience does. To them, it's just a pretty patio. Ask your designer if they work with a copywriter, or have one on staff, that can interview you and write the copy for the site. Even if you write the bulk of it, you'll want to make sure a professional reviews and edits it.

6. Archaic method for viewing photos.

What's shown in your photo gallery is probably the biggest selling point to a potential customer. Unfortunately, most landscape sites make the viewer work too hard to look at their work - and they end up frustrating their audience.

Years ago, one big issue that needed to be considered when building a landscape company web site was the manner in

Figure 3.

An Easier Way to View Photos Online:



This web site (<http://www.nicolazzobros.com/>) illustrate a simple way to quickly view photos. Simply place the mouse on the smaller thumbnails on the left side, and the large photo pops into the window on the right side.

which the photos were loaded and viewed. Load times were clearly more critical several years ago than they are today. The vast majority of higher-end consumers are on some type of high-speed internet, and since they are presumably your target audience, we can design much easier and efficient ways for your photos to be viewed.

For the last several years, we have designed photo galleries using a disjointed photo method. We have found that this is the simplest and most efficient way to allow viewed to quickly look at a lot of photos. It eliminates popups, or annoying 'before and next' type navigation. The view simply stays on one page, and places their mouse over smaller

thumbs, that, in turn, display the larger photo. Nothing to click, no browser 'back' buttons needed. (See Figure 3)

7. Templated Sites

Templated sites offer the advantage of a lower cost entry onto the Web. You can pick from existing sites and through a web interface, simply drop your information into the pre-packaged site. You can also add and delete photos on your own without needing to ask your web designer. But the question remains whether a templated site can adequately reflect your company, and your corporate identity.

Our philosophy of web design runs contrary to what templated

sites offer. We believe no two companies are alike, and that each site needs to be built according to each company's specific marketing goals, and corporate identity.

8. Web Hosting Plans and Stats Importance

Consider the importance of the web hosting plan offered by your designer. One feature that is often overlooked is how the web hosting provides stats for your web traffic. Analyzing your hits, page views and other information tells you where people go on your site, and how long they stay. For example, if your average visitor spend only 30 seconds on your site, then maybe it's not working properly. It's also helpful to know where your traffic is originating from (i.e. search engines, other web sites, etc).

9. Do your homework when choosing a firm to undertake your web design

Make sure whomever you hire to build your site understands your

company and the message you are trying to communicate. Make sure you find appealing designs in their portfolio - otherwise, don't be surprised if you're not happy with their design for your business. Query them on experience, methods used, and their depth of knowledge in marketing a site as well as building a site. Call their referrals, and make sure they've had a good experience in dealing with the designer. This is a big decision, and making the wrong choice will prove to be a costly error. Do your homework and due diligence!



Dan Antonelli is president and creative director for LandscaperMarketing.com and Graphic D-Signs, Inc., a full service graphic design and advertising firm that specializes in landscaper marketing. He can

be reached at dan@landscapermarketing.com or 908-835-9000. He is also the author of *Logo Design for Small Business* and *Logo Design for Small Business 2*.

Some Sample Sites To Get Ideas From:

Here are several sites which illustrate some of the points made in the article.

- <http://www.preciseirrigationinc.com/>
- <http://www.abstoday.com/>
- <http://www.galandscape.com/>
- <http://www.djhelmkelandscaping.com/>
- <http://www.outdoor-magic.com/>
- <http://www.edgewaterdesign.com/>
- <http://www.earthscapespm.com/>
- <http://www.scape-abilities.com/>
- <http://www.sodabear.com/>
- <http://www.1888lawntec.com/>
- <http://www.vacationretreatmanagement.com/>
- <http://www.harringtonscapes.com/>
- <http://greenmeadowsinc.com/>



Suggested Outline of Your Landscape Company Site:

Most sites utilize consistent buttons that people expect to see when visiting a site. Here's a general outline of what your site should include:

Home Page: You'll want to make sure you have something to capture their attention and sets the tone for the rest of the site. We like to use flash on the home page to provide some visual excitement. It's also important to use a lot of HTML text on the home page for search engine purposes.

About: Here's where we can talk a little more in detail about your business, our dedication to excellence, your experience, awards, honors, etc. You may or may not want to include a picture of yourself, your shop trucks and your employees.

Services: You can have one page that lists all your services, or perhaps multiple buttons for each category (i.e. landscape design, hardscaping, snowplowing, maintenance, chemical applications)

Portfolio: This is the meat of the site, and where most visitors will spend most of their time. You can also subdivide this category, perhaps with before and afters, hardscapes, or design categories.

Testimonials: Adds credibility, and our research proves that this is one of the most popular pages on a site. People really do read them.

Contact Us: Use a form for potential clients to fill out. Include your phone and email address on this page, and on every page of the site.