



Lessons from the 'Little Guy'

Smaller precasting outfits like Barger & Sons Inc. are marketing just like the big guns.

BY GREG SNAPPER

PHOTOS BY GREG SNAPPER AND RON HYINK

Eric Barger has found a new niche in self-promotion where few precasters tread technical marketing and it's paying off big for Barger & Sons Inc.

Since 2003, the year Eric Barger became president of precast operations at age 26, sales at Harriman, Tenn.-based Barger & Sons jumped 400 percent, and Eric attributes the lion's share of new growth to Web promotion, the core of Barger's 21st century marketing strategy.

Eric Barger is one of the most successful young leaders in the industry, and his approach to marketing proves it. He invests significant resources in multimedia, computers and communications technologies to market creatively, and he hires marketing staff to manage it all. With these investments tied to technical white papers, brochures, magazine articles, T-shirts, hats and even pocket knives with the company logo, Eric pushes the company brand further into the marketplace. He waits for no one except the droves of clients screaming for bigger and better septic tanks and grease interceptors. He meets those demands by marketing effectively and efficiently, educating users instead of just selling them tanks. And he does it all while staying true to his company's roots as a family-owned business.

In sharp contrast are those companies at the opposite end of the promotional scale—the precasters who develop a print ad and call it a day on their marketing efforts. Most companies today fall somewhere between the two extremes. Eric





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ERIC BARGER



doesn't abandon traditional promotion altogether far from it. He believes in convergence: bringing old school thought and 21st century marketing together.

A long-distance sale

Eric's phone rang last fall, and on the other end a wildlife conservationist from San Juan, Puerto Rico, shared a compelling need. A few seconds into the call, Eric was courteous but thought, "This must be a wrong number." But it was no misguided call, because 10 days later, a 5,000-gallon Barger grease interceptor was on a barge headed for a parrot sanctuary in the Puerto Rican rainforest. An instructional DVD filmed and narrated by Eric himself was tucked away in a packet of brochures and other marketing items to accompany the tank on its 1,600-mile journey. The video guided contractors at the construction

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RIGHT: BRIANNE LANKFORD, MARKETING SPECIALIST FOR BARGER & SONS INC., PREPARES MATERIALS FOR BARGER GREASE INTERCEPTOR AND SEPTIC TANK PROMOTION.

BELOW: ERIC BARGER LEADS PROMOTION EFFORTS FOR THE COMPANY WITH EMPHASIS ON A STRONG WEB PRESENCE AND TECHNICAL MARKETING.



selected metatags, or keywords, embedded in each of the company's Web pages. So with a quick search engine query, parrot officials found Eric with a few keyboard strokes and a click of the mouse.

Since the San Juan project, Eric's web-savvy marketing has led to negotiations with American contractors in the Middle East. Last summer, a Kuwaiti importer found Barger & Sons online and e-mailed Eric an RFP for 11,500-gallon grease interceptors. As the bidding process narrowed, Barger &

Sons was neck to neck with Halliburton, the Iraq reconstruction contractor. "Halliburton beat us out," Eric said. "I'm not entirely sure what happened there, but we lost that bid." In the future, Eric wouldn't mind competing with the big boys and, if not trumping Halliburton on a few international tank requests, at least matching up against the precast industry's biggest companies would be fun. In the meantime, though, he remembers to stay grounded. Eric reminds himself often that without a strong foundation built from smart business practices and a dedicated workforce, even the best marketing strategy is bound to fail.

Not his grandparents' promotion

Eric's grandparents built Barger & Sons on hand-made septic tanks and personal integrity. In 1967, C.R. and Mary Barger's first precast concrete septic tanks were born in a small shop behind an old country store that belonged to Eric's great-great-grandfather. Tanks were handcrafted with trowels and a simple two-piece form—no sealant, no vacuum testing, and sizes were small, only 750-gallon tanks. Overall, the product was simple but well-made. Though the official term for "marketing" barely existed in the industry, with every handshake, the Barger's septic tank side-job grew into an eastern Tennessee precast success story.

And that success continues today. Nearly 40 years after C.R. and Mary's foray into septic tank manufacturing, production soars as plant capacity is stretched beyond 150 percent, a sure-fire indicator for future expansion. Since the '60s, the Barger's four-acre plant delivered special-ordered tanks on a need-only basis, but things operate differently now. Increased demand over the past three years has ushered in a need for Barger sprawl. A 15-acre site just two miles east of the current plant would more than triple Barger's production space. "Plant B" would shoulder "super tanks," Eric's new line of mega grease interceptors. The 10,000- and 15,000-gallon giants meet demands from schools, private utilities and large churches.

"Eventually we'll move the whole kit and caboodle,



site with proper installation techniques, ensuring quality control on the only delivery in Barger history where a Barger & Sons driver or Eric himself wasn't present for the installation.

Few Puerto Rican parrots still roam their natural habitat, but a select few are being cared for and protected at the new Luquillo Aviary in San Juan. There, potable water for parrot consumption is scarce, so aviary officials requested an underground rain water catch basin. The grease interceptor-turned-rain collector catches rainfall and stores it until demand requires tapping it for parrot use. So how in the world did a troubled parrot get connected with a rural Tennessee precaster? There's no other place but the Web.

Web marketing at its best

Eric positions Barger & Sons on the Internet with carefully



ABOVE AND RIGHT: ERIC BARGER COMPARES HIS PRODUCTION WORKERS AND DELIVERY DRIVERS TO THE STRATEGIC POSITIONS OF A SUPER BOWL-WINNING FOOTBALL TEAM. THE PRODUCTION WORKERS ARE LIKE OFFENSIVE LINEMEN, BECAUSE THEY ARE RELATIVELY UNKNOWN OUTSIDE THE COMPANY DESPITE THE IMPORTANT ROLE THEY PLAY; THE DRIVERS ARE LIKE QUARTERBACKS, BECAUSE THEY ARE WELL KNOWN TO CUSTOMERS AND REPRESENT THE ENTIRE COMPANY.

leaving our current plant to the utility division of Barger & Sons," Eric said. "The main reason for [Plant B] is for super-large tanks. We need to relocate to meet clients' requests, so clients are simply giving us a push." Soon enough, Eric hopes to jump into bridge and architectural work. Immediate construction of the new site would ease up production stress at the home base. Any future architectural endeavors would follow once Plant B is operational.

Family ties

With all of Eric's expansion plans, he still keeps to Barger tradition. Just like gram and gramps would want it, employees are treated as family. Blood relatives or not, the 13-person workforce acts as a familial unit. Dad passed the precast division reigns to Eric in 2003 but still manages the utility division of Barger & Sons (water, sewer and gas line construction for local municipalities); Mom handles administrative operations; and Eric's brother is dad's right-hand man who also manages human resources (Mickey, Pat and Wesley, respectively). As for the out-of-office family? Eric compares his floor workers and delivery drivers to the strategic positions of a Super Bowl-winning football team.

"The guys who make the tanks are critical—they're our offensive linemen," Eric said, explaining that no one outside the company really knows these front-line guys despite their dynamic role. "And the drivers are similar to quarterbacks—everyone knows who they are; they're the first contact with clients."





Catalogued, Tracked and Zapped

With the touch of a button, hours of manual data entry are whisked away instantly. Barger & Sons' brainy Precast-IT!, the trademark name for Precast Information Technology database and bar code system, is the "HAL" of the precast concrete industry. In the main office at Barger & Sons Inc. sits a standard PC – at first glance a glorified word processor and Solitaire player, but looks are deceiving. A customized database designed by former Y-12 National Security Complex talent serves as the information bank for every precast concrete product made and shipped at Barger & Sons.

In a prior life, Terry Futrell prepared technology development plans for the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn., and Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. His newest job listing on a rather lengthy resume is consultant for Barger & Sons Inc., a little less glamorous, he says, but nonetheless a "challenging mental exercise." Futrell was hired to create the database to meet the specific needs of precast tank manufacturing, a chore he describes as providing total product lifecycle support for Barger & Sons.

"The system tracks both precast products and commodities, such as piping and pumps, providing complete inventory accounting for the company," Futrell said. "We're not linked directly to the Barger accounting system, but we do cross-connect deliveries and invoices. This allows the administrative staff to readily retrieve complete information on deliveries that satisfied a customer."

order." This capability is highlighted by what Futrell calls an Invoice Fulfillment Pedigree Report, which provides a complete manufacturing, testing and delivery history for every item delivered to satisfy the customer order.

So here's what Precast-IT! tracks:

- Test data from every batch of concrete.
- Detailed information on every precast concrete product, including product size, form, manufacturing and assembly dates, relevant state standards, water and vacuum testing results, current inventory status, description of any required repair actions and general product notes.
- Serial numbers for every precast concrete component and every assembled tank.

- Identifier data for each employee making deliveries or using the database.
- Identifier data for each delivery and customer invoice.
- Truck fuel consumption and mileage.
- Products picked up at the plant by customers.

Accessorize IT!

Delivery drivers would be the first to say they lack high-level computer skills. So Futrell made Precast-IT! simple for every user. Septic tanks and grease interceptors are bar coded with a super-adhesive sticker branded with a serial number. These serial numbers, together with the loader and driver badge numbers, the delivery number and the customer invoice number, are all scanned



TERRY FUTRELL IS THE BRAINS BEHIND BARGER & SONS' BAR CODING AND DATABASE SYSTEM.

by a hand-held laser bar code reader, and every transaction automatically receives a date/time stamp. The driver can easily capture a complete record of every customer delivery, which is later used for record keeping, analysis and automatic inventory update. The use of bar codes for all product and personnel identifiers almost totally eliminates keyed data entry and frees the driver from paper, pens or reliance on short-term memory.

"It's just a matter of scanning," Futrell said. "These guys don't have significant computer literacy. So one of our design objectives was to make the system simple enough so that all (driver) Russell has to do is plug the reader (portable data terminal) into the PC dock back at home base, click the mouse on the import bar code data button, and all the information scanned while on delivery is transferred automatically to the database at home base."

As the database collects the day's cache of scanned serials from the bar code reader, the delivery driver's job is done. Manual data entry becomes obsolete and the driver can move on to more pressing matters.



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A lot of the pressure is riding on them.

And drivers don't just navigate the twisting Tennessee roads with 10-ton product in their rearview mirrors. They are the dynamic on-site representatives, following up with clients and solving problems during crises. "It's more work, but it pays off," Eric says. "We're more expensive than our competition, probably \$100 more on our residential line and \$1,000 in our commercial line, but we're well worth it."

According to Tennessee utilities, Barger tanks are well worth the price. Tennessee law requires utilities to follow stringent wastewater codes. Rules call for every gallon of sewage entering an on-site sewage treatment plant to result in one gallon of treated water. In response, these plant manufacturers often specify Barger's watertight tanks and have done so for the past eight years.

"We have built a business around doing what people call impossible."

In the past year, retention has gotten a lot easier for Barger & Sons: they're making better products and they're making clients smarter. Based on recommendations from the Knoxville Utility Board (KUB), a prospective client, Barger & Sons

upped the value of its grease interceptors in September 2004 by getting them H2o highway traffic rated. The heavy-duty product is designed for 8-foot cover, and it's built tough enough to withstand the passage of a fully loaded tractor trailer. With exclusive bragging rights as the state's only H2o grease interceptor manufacturer, Barger's newest product comes with a fat price tag.

OKUB wanted 1,000-gallon traffic-rated tanks, so we made them," Eric said. "The only problem is getting commercial and industrial clients to buy in because they cost \$2,500 as opposed to our competitors' non-traffic rated grease interceptor, which runs \$400."

Some precasters would find it impossible to justify a superior product's price that is six times costlier than the competition's generic grease interceptor. Eric says the buy-in from clients is earned through savvy marketing and personalized service.

Eric starts out with a technical white paper for all of the indecisive clients. "It's the first thing they see," Eric says. "We draw a clear technical picture that explains why the product will help them. The language and presentation of the white paper are key."

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Perhaps the only Barger & Sons' product without the company logo, the white paper is left brandless, because Eric wants the engineer, contractor or architect to adopt the design as their own.

I want him to pass it up the line of command as his design; that's why it's left independent," Eric says. "When he takes credit for the design option and brings it to the powers that be, that's our ammunition for selling our product. You want indisputable language and terms so clients understand the superiority of the product."

In the past six months, Barger & Sons have sold 60 percent

more H2o traffic-rated tanks than those interceptors without the rating. "Nobody thought that would happen because of the expense associated with the H2o product," Eric said. "The marketing worked." During the product's development stages, even his family doubted the H2o design because labor and cost were such big factors. At the rate of success with the H2o design, the tanks could be 10 times the cost of a competitor's products, and engineers, architects and utilities would still line up to buy them.

"It's about liability and the environment," Eric said. "The P.E.-designed tank helps shoulder liabilities that utilities and commercial clients face constantly these days. On top of it all, the design enhances the structure's quality, promoting a safer, more ecologically friendly tank."

Technical marketing, networking, a strong Web site presence and personalized service draw customers to Barger's products. "We convince our customers of the quality of the product and reassure them that maintenance and future service are guaranteed," Eric said.

With thinking like that, Eric is stepping confidently into the future. And that makes Barger & Sons a precaster for the new millennium. **mc**



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