

From cell phones to street trees



by LISA LIEFKE

‘Why would someone with a stable and lucrative career in the mobile phone industry decide to start over in a small, family run business?’

Lisa Liefke is director of marketing and operations for Urban Forest Nursery Inc., Mount Vernon, WA. She can be reached at (360) 428-5810 or lisa@urbanforestnursery.com. The nursery's Web site is www.urbanforestnursery.com.

When I first mentioned to my parents, Ann and Jim Barborinas, the desire to work for our family’s wholesale tree nursery, they were not quite sure I was serious. Why would someone with a stable and lucrative career in the mobile phone industry decide to start over in a small, family run business? It was only after several months of proving to them my interest that they realized my request was sincere. So, after I convinced them to give me — an individual with no industry experience — a chance, I started working at Urban Forest Nursery Inc., Mount Vernon, WA, in February 2009.

The initial expectation was that I would start by implementing a new tree inventory-management system that we had just purchased. I quickly learned that I needed a significant amount of training from my father before I would be able to complete the inventory work for the 200-plus varieties. However, given his time constraints of running two full-time businesses (he also owns an arboricultural consulting company), I knew I would have to find other ways in the short term to be a productive contributor to the company.

Spending several years in project- and product-management roles in the corporate world, I knew the importance of data tracking and trend analysis, as well as creating a brand image and then marketing that brand. So, when I was unable to work with my parents on the inventory system implementation, I began tackling these other areas for the company.

My first priority was to work with my mother to map out where the company had been over the past 12 to 18 months and determine what metrics should be tracked. Fortunately for me, my mother has kept track of the books meticulously since the company started 15 years ago, so I was able to pull up historical data for invoiced sales, receivables, customers and much more for use in the data analysis. We quickly created monthly and executive reports to track the data year-over-year, and a monthly operations meeting was set up to review the trend analysis and draw conclusions on what that meant for the company.

In my previous job, entire teams of people were responsible for this type of work; however, I began to realize that in a small company there is not the time, nor the resources, to track and analyze data at a granular level. Understandably, priority goes to those items needing immediate attention, and the focus is not always long term. Given this, I felt fortunate to be able to start working on some of these things for our small company.

So, after a few months of reviewing the new reports, we could truly see the value of the information at hand. We now had at our fingertips information on our most valued customers, our top-selling varieties, our potential future sales and more. Trending this data over time will help us better determine which trees to plant, set expectations for quarterly expenses and revenue, track which months see the best sales and decide where to focus our marketing efforts.

To that end, the second item we tackled was related to the company’s marketing strategy. My parents had built a very good foundation for this by hiring someone to create a Web site a few years back, as well as making sure information about the company was included in many national and regional magazines and newsletters. However, as with all Web sites, the information does get stale after a while, and without someone in-house who can make timely updates, it can become cumbersome and costly to maintain. We thought it would be best to bring the Web site in-house and develop it ourselves.

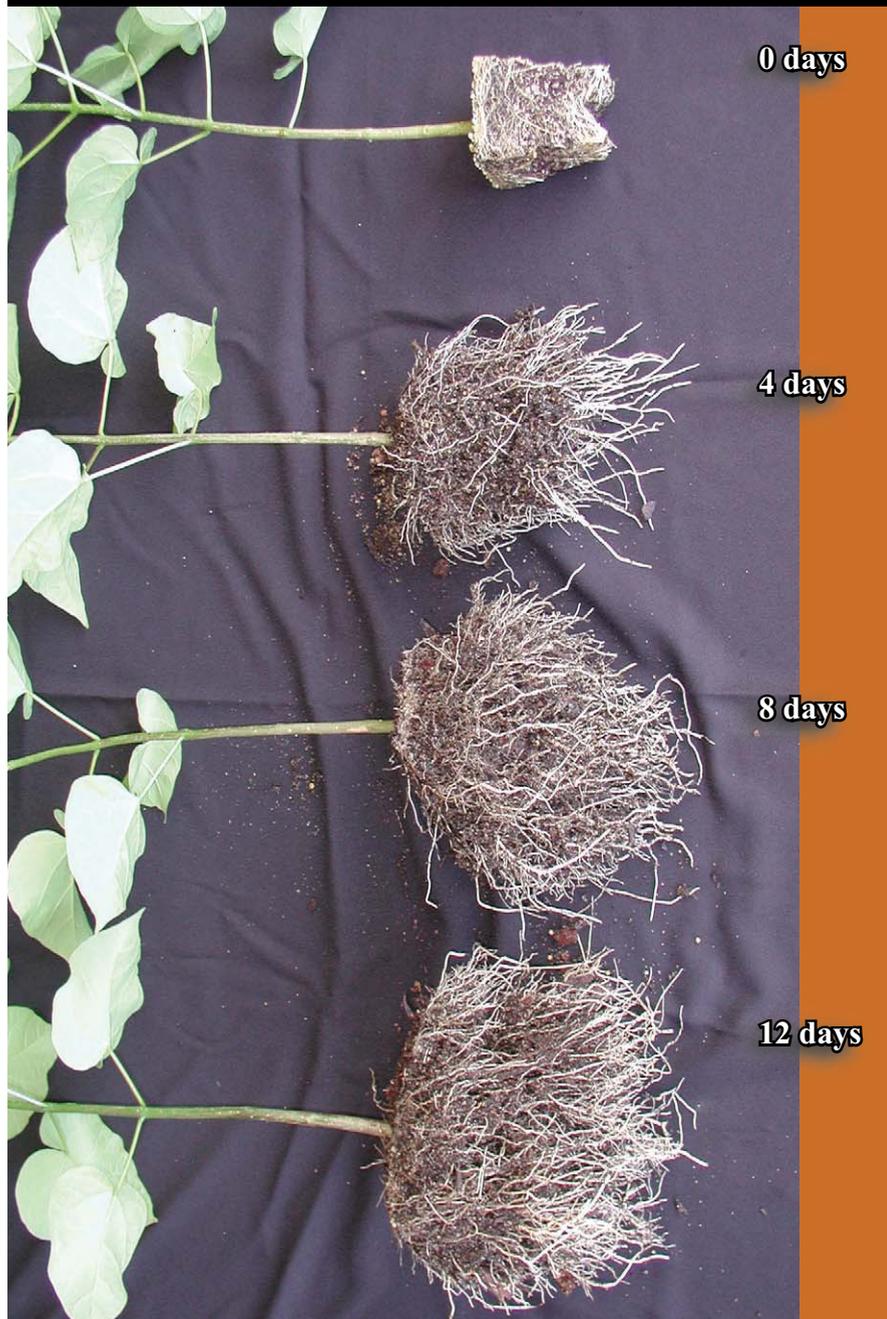
After a few weeks of online and book training, I decided to tackle the project. I worked closely with my parents on design and content, and relied on my father's tree expertise and industry knowledge to complete much of the site. We now have a Web site that provides even more information to our customers on specific tree profiles, our growing techniques and several other technical recommendations related to both the nursery and consulting businesses. Once we get our inventory-management system up and running, we will have direct links to real-time information on trees available for purchase.

In order to bring even more attention to our Web site, we jumped on the social-networking bandwagon and created a Facebook page for the nursery, started a new blog and opened a Twitter account. Visitors to our Web site can become a Facebook fan of Urban Forest Nursery, check out our latest Twitter post and/or link directly to our blog. Marketing of any company is all about getting your name out there where people can see it. Combining these social-networking opportunities and additional online directory advertising with traditional marketing has provided us with new — and otherwise inaccessible — potential customers.

So, back to the original question of why would someone give up a successful corporate career to work with her parents at a small, family tree nursery? For those of you who have worked in a large corporation, you know the limitations and bureaucracy that often get in the way of implementing real change. I saw this as a great opportunity to not only learn from my parents how a small business is run, but also to use some of the ideas I ascertained from the corporate world that I could never implement due to sheer size and structure of a large company. So far, it has been a very rewarding experience. In a corporate job, I had little direct control over my day-to-day responsibilities and did not have the ability to quickly affect change. Although I am still very new to the industry and have a lot to learn about running a tree nursery, I have learned a great deal from my family about working in a small business environment.

I feel fortunate that my parents have built two very successful companies and that I was able to convince them to let a non-tree-savvy-corporate-type come in and implement a few new ideas. I believe that with my father's expertise and dedication to delivering a quality product, my mother's attention to detail and knack for organization, and our newly developed data analysis and marketing focus, the sky is the limit for Urban Forest Nursery! ♡

RootMaker®



Not just if... *When*



0, 4, 8, and 12 days of root explosion from RootMaker® propagation containers.

The Original Root-Pruning Container System.®

RootMaker® Products Co., LLC

1-800-824-3941 www.rootmaker.com

For free information circle 11 on the fax-back form on page 65