

# STANDING OUT from the Green crowd

NaturZone, an early green adopter, is reinforcing its message.

By Brad Harbison and Stefanie Toth

Ever since it was founded in 1988, Sarasota, Fla.-based NaturZone has had a knack of succeeding by not copying its competitors. For example, in 1998, while “green” was a novelty offering for the vast majority of pest control companies it was the foundation on which NaturZone was built.

NaturZone developed a pest control program that specialized in the use of non-invasive products, technologies and treatment strategies — offerings that had a broad appeal to the progressive, environmentally-concerned Southwest Florida region. NaturZone’s primary focus was commercial accounts. This business model proved successful and spurred the company’s growth in its early years. But a funny thing happened several years ago. “Green” became all the rage and suddenly that dynamic and unique marketing message that NaturZone used to set itself apart from its competitors was now commonplace in the pest control industry.

**A NEW APPROACH.** So what has NaturZone done to stand out from this clut-

tered field? NaturZone President Doug Longfellow said the company, which he purchased in 2005, has undergone an aggressive, targeted marketing campaign to educate the public about green pest control, pointing out that NaturZone has been offering green services since 1988.

“The other thing that we’ve done is obtain certifications that have some ‘teeth,’” said Longfellow. “For example, we are members of [NPMA’s] GreenPro and they have actually audited us, so we have [explained] that to prospective clients.” In other words, NaturZone’s sales reps review the GreenPro audit process to prospective clients, to further illustrate the company’s credentials.

Another important change for NaturZone has been its sales approach, which now relies more on educating clients about IPM principles. Previously, NaturZone’s “green” message was heavily focused on products. “How I’ve tried to position ourselves is that in ‘green pest control,’ product is at least second, if not third, in line,” he said.

For example, a NaturZone competitor might be treating a high-rise condominium complex with traditional pesticides and strategies that involve treating the interior of each unit. “In Florida, 90 per-

cent of all pest problems are ants or large cockroaches, which are all outdoor pests, so we sit down with people and try to educate them,” Longfellow said. “We ask, ‘Why are you spending more money than you need to, to go through every unit and basically do a reactive program? Why not let me spend three times as much time on the outside [as your current vendor] in a proactive way?’ To me that is more ‘green’ than product selection because we have taken pesticide use out of the indoor environment — unless there is a problem.”

Longfellow also has changed the tools he’s used for spreading this marketing message. For example, one mistake he admits to is misallocation of marketing dollars. “When I bought the company one change

I made was increasing our Yellow Pages ad from a half page to a full page. We got nothing in response. It wasn’t a good way for our clients — which are primarily commercial customers — to link with us.”

Longfellow decided to reduce NaturZone’s Yellow Pages presence (in one city from \$17,000 per year to \$1,200 per

annum) and reinvest this money into hiring new sales representatives and becoming more involved in associations. “For instance, we are involved in two organizations for condo property managers — and we joined at the highest level. So we will pay more and in return to get things like advertising at their events. We do every tradeshow and happy hour mixer where we can network with property managers.”



Doug Longfellow

These and other changes are paying off. NaturZone has experienced double-digit growth every year for the last five years. When Longfellow bought NaturZone in 2005 the company was just a shade under \$500,000; NaturZone's 2010 year-end revenues were \$1.1 million.

**A VISION REALIZED.** Longfellow's pest control career dates back to 1977. He has held nearly every pest control position, ranging from service and sales to senior management. In 1984, he left his job as a technician with a St. Petersburg, Fla. company to work for Rentokil. While his previous employer was strictly residential, Rentokil's customer base is largely commercial. This helped Longfellow see the potential of green treatments in both commercial and residential markets.

Longfellow rose through the ranks at Rentokil, eventually becoming president of Rentokil USA, a position he held from 1999-2004.

In May 2005, Longfellow purchased NaturZone from Travis Wellbrock and Mark Studtmann, the owners and founders of the company. NaturZone appealed to Longfellow because it was one of the first companies in the Sarasota area to incorporate environmentally-friendly practices into their pesticide treatments, he said.

Longfellow has taken that business model and expanded it to encompass all facets of being environmentally friendly. He boiled the whole concept down to one question that his technicians have to ask during an evaluation: "What is the least toxic way to get rid of existing infestations?" He trained NaturZone technicians to diagnose based on the biology of the insect and environmental factors. In addition, he established an all-green treatment method that involves an in-depth evaluation in which NaturZone technicians determine which 60 different products are appropriate for the situation or whether a non-pesticide method would work.

NaturZone offers a pest-proofing service that has reduced the use of pesticides. When technicians see no use for an application, they will instead return to a client's home or business to fix pipes and gaps under doors. They also will clean drains and recommend housekeeping tips. Because NaturZone's service area has significant leaf litter and palm trees, large roaches are a common pest. The company advises customers to trim trees, and this is documented in a written assessment of the property.

Longfellow's goals include further fine-tuning NaturZone's marketing approach. Also, in 2005 he launched NaturZone International, dba NaturZone Worldwide Franchise (NWF). NWF licenses the NaturZone trademark and implementation of green pest control business. Franchises have been sold in Pennsylvania, Arizona, Mexico and the United Arab Emirates. **PCT**

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