

A New Angle

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Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security bank Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business. Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today I'm speaking with Ross Peterson, Doug Shryock and Steve Rice. Together, these three created Little Dumps and Bulk Delivery Pro, two businesses that encapsulate the creativity and hustle this show has always tried to celebrate.

Ross Peterson And this for me was the first time where I realized, like, I could build something on the web that would directly impact other people's lives, maybe even my own, you know, in the real world.

Justin Angle This is a story of how a landscaping business grokked its way into the software industry. Fellas, thanks for joining me today.

Doug Shryock Awesome. Thank you.

Ross Peterson Thanks for having us.

Justin Angle So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do? Ross, let's start with you.

Ross Peterson I grew up here in Missoula, born and raised. My folks, my dad is in real estate, has been for a long time. And then my mom was a professor here for a long time. She was in the Home EC department and then eventually in the Education Department.

Justin Angle Doug, how about you?

Doug Shryock Yeah, I grew up in Whitefish, Montana. I moved to Missoula in 2003 to go to the University of Montana. My parents, my mom's a French teacher at Whitefish High School, and my dad was a guidance counselor at Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell.

Steve Rice I grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, just outside of Chicago, and my dad owned a car dealership for about, I want to say, 35 years. And then my mom was a local public high school administrator.

Justin Angle Doug, I'd like to start with you. You've been in the landscaping game for a long time. Maybe talk about your way into landscaping and how you've built a business over several years in the field.

Doug Shryock The back story actually goes back to high school. My friend, my next door neighbor, Robert Sullivan, and I had a mowing business just to make money in the summer. When I moved here in the summer, I worked for an excavation company in Missoula, and once I graduated, you know, I really really enjoyed it and decided, you know, take out a loan, get a machine and go out on my own. I had a couple of friends that needed some projects done, didn't have a good business plan, anything like that. I just kind of went for it. So 27, I started Wild Rockies Landscaping and I'm still here.

Justin Angle I think here in the College of Business, we often sort of think of our students as poised to go off into more professional white collar sorts of jobs. So you invested in the college education. You chose to kind of work in a small business but do so outdoors working with your hands.

Doug Shryock My education definitely helped along the way. It gave me good roots and an understanding of basic business philosophy and principles. I took an entrepreneurship class and that really kind of lit a fire under me my senior year.

Justin Angle Super. So let's talk about the growth of Wild Rockies for a moment. At some point along the way, this opportunity to create Little Dumps presents itself. First of all, and maybe this is where we bring Ross into the conversation, what is Little Dumps? How did it come to be around 2017?

Doug Shryock You know, for ten years we'd been building a pretty strong customer base through these landscape jobs. And at that point, some of the landscapes were maturing and they needed to be refreshed, whether it's mulch, decorative rock, any of the landscape materials. And so I started getting a lot of call backs and people were like, Hey, can you bring us five yards of shredded fur marker, three yards of river rock? And it became a bit of an issue in the sense that I had to pull employees off of the job to go deliver it. Ross had also had this problem, so I reached out to him and I was like, I have this idea to deliver landscape material, but maybe we could figure out a more streamlined way than a carbon copy. And he's like, you know, let me let me think about this and maybe I can whip up some type of simple website and we'll see if people will order online.

Justin Angle Ross how did you how did this problem manifest in your world?

Ross Peterson I was lucky enough to invest in a rental house here in town, and so that's where we met, where I met Doug. I was trying to fix up this rental house and do the landscaping myself. There would be times where I just needed a yard or two of, you know, something, topsoil mulch, something. And I couldn't figure out how to get it. It was to buy it and bags at a home, you know, like a Home Depot or Ace or something. But I didn't know who to call to get a bill.

Justin Angle So you're facing this problem, this challenge of getting the materials from the customer standpoint, and Doug's facing it from the provider standpoint. You have this problem

as a customer, you have this problem as a business owner. And it seems like there's room for a solution.

Ross Peterson My career after getting out of school was building websites. I, you know, kind of naively thought, I'll just figure out there's, this can't be that hard to sell these kinds of materials online can't be all that different than selling a T-shirt. And I dealt with plenty of e-commerce stores over the years. So I pulled together a site using some kind of off the shelf stuff that we got it to work and just figured, let's see what happens. You know, we handed out some business cards and stuck a magnet on the side of one of Doug's trucks and gave it a go.

Justin Angle I'm assuming it was more complex than just selling T-shirts.

Ross Peterson It turns out, yeah. That we ran into lots of little snags. We were able to get around them because we kind of owned the pipeline, so to speak. You know, we could massage the challenges. But yeah, so then, you know, it kind of got to the point where it was busy enough that we could keep a driver going. And after a season or two with that website, we realized it wasn't going to, it just wasn't gonna work. And we added a second truck, and finally had enough demand for two vehicles and two drivers. Everything kind of fell apart. And then the pandemic hit. It offered an opportunity both in great demand for this service, but it also gave us this chance to actually sort of have time to sit down and rewrite the whole thing from scratch.

Justin Angle And Steve, let's bring you in. At what point do you plug in to the operation?

Steve Rice I have a background in sales and marketing and various jobs in and around Chicago. Did a little bit of urban agriculture, a little bit of food service work. And then on the side, I was actually doing some work for my sister just at her house. I was actually building her a bocce ball court. So when we were building this bocce court, we actually had to build the French drain underneath the whole thing. So I actually needed to bring in, I think it was 14 tons, you know, lots of material of gravel. And it was at a suburban house on a driveway where I wanted to get it delivered. But in that process, I faced frustrations that, you know, unknowingly these guys were tackling, you know, 2500 miles away or whatever it is. Eventually I got the court built and it was great, but it was like a month later where I through friends, I heard about this guy Ross in Montana who was building a software specifically for the issue that I had just faced. I know this doesn't exist anywhere in and around Chicago, which if it doesn't, it's likely that it doesn't exist anywhere. The ability for, you know, a DIY or to just order this stuff online, have it delivered exactly where you want it. So I spoke up and I said, listen, if and when you guys grow, give me a shout. Let me know. I would love to come help you out. And, you know, whatever that means. They got back in touch saying, listen, if you're serious, we need somebody to run the landscape supply yard. We need somebody, another guy to drive a dump truck. So I told my mom that I was moving to Montana to sell dirt, and she was obviously thrilled. Three plus years later, here we are.

Justin Angle So, Doug, I have to ask you, and I would imagine there has to be some experience within your business where you have an asset and that asset would otherwise be idle. But now that asset can be making money for you. It's not quite a passive income play, but like that sensation of like, Hey, I have this thing I spent a lot of money on and it can go add value for a customer and harvest some income while I'm doing other things 100%.

Doug Shryock And that was really when we got going. We're like, Well, we have this extra dump truck, let's use it, you know? And a lot of other people I think are in a similar position.

Justin Angle Yeah. So let's break down the software challenge for a moment, because I think people hearing this might be thinking, well, it's just, you know, delivering dirt and rocks, but turns out it's a lot more complicated. It involves a whole host of variables that somebody, even if somebody who has used the site, might not quite consider.

Ross Peterson It was the second truck that really threw the sort of the wrench, so to speak, which was suddenly now we had we had double the inventory of of deliveries we could take, but we didn't want to make we didn't know the best way to make that easy for a customer to understand, you know? And then we had two drivers. We wanted to make sure that the drivers knew which things they needed to take. And so it was a combination of how do we keep this simple on the front end so that the customer has a, you know, the least number of clicks they need to make that purchase. And then on the back end, we want the drivers to have all the information directly from the customer so that they could deliver without error. And there

didn't need to be somebody in the middle. You know, a lot of times businesses similar to this, an order comes in through the phone. It goes through a dispatcher slash office manager, and there's one point of touch there. And then if they're lucky, the next point goes straight to the driver. But there's still that opportunity for error. There's just lost time. We wanted to find a way that we could do it right from. Customer to driver.

Justin Angle And there's a very important location variable that we have. I don't want to gloss over. It's not like when, you know, the Fedex guy comes in, you can't get the signature and they drop it with your neighbor. Like if you've got a yard or two of material, you need to put it in the right place. And a customer probably has strong preferences around where that place is by design.

Ross Peterson Little dumps picked the same size truck. So we did that because we wanted to keep it simple. But as the software has grown, we've realized that lots of other customers, you know, have a whole different fleet of different sized trucks with different volumes. So how much material it can carry and then how much weight, both of which are independent, you know, you can have a little bit of heavy gravel or a lot of lightweight mulch. You know, we needed to build out a software solution that would accommodate any kind of truck that they could put in, and then customers could purchase materials of different volumes and it would route to the right vehicle in the end. And this is different from a Ubereats or something where you can order a pizza and take it in any kind of vehicle right to your motorcycle. But this world is just different when it comes to delivery.

Justin Angle Yeah. And I want to make sure we don't skip an important plot point. I mean, Steve, we mentioned your entry point. Sounds similar to how Doug and Ross came together as sort of a shared problem from different perspectives. You experienced this problem as somebody trying to build the basketball court. Ross has solved it for his partnership with Doug. But you're starting to see a market opportunity here. How can this solution that these two have come up with meet the needs of other folks?

Steve Rice One thing that I recognized is that, you know, even five, six years ago, folks were using their smartphone to run their lives. They were using it to literally ask strangers to take them to the airport. Right. But how is it that one can't order dirt or rocks and have it delivered to them, that there's this friction when it comes to these bulk materials going to a quarry or a pit or a landscape supply yard? If you don't know a guy with a truck or know a guy that has a dump trailer, it can be hard to get gravel. It can be hard to get your, you know, paver base to build your backyard patio. And essentially, you know, all my friends are finding their dates or ordering their food all in their device, in their pocket. And I'm like, hold on. These guys are using the Internet to solve a really cool blue collar problem. I'd love to be a part of that.

Justin Angle Yeah. And how does that sort of market exploration process been of finding people who might find this product useful? They might not even know it exists. They might not even realize they need it. What's that sales process been like?

Steve Rice Unlike a company like Uber or GrubHub or DoorDash, one of these national brands that somebody could go to and order food to have delivered, we recognize that there's already people doing the hard work of driving a dump truck. There's already people that have landscape supply yards, concrete bins of material, their logo on the side of their truck. So instead of creating a brand where it's like, Hey, become one of our drivers, let's empower those local folks, those mom and pop shops, to give them the state of the art tools to be able to offer this new service. Because I'm in Missoula, Montana for three years, it is the only place where you can order these things on demand. Yeah, I mean, some people have introduced like, you know, some version of online ordering and I'm putting air quotes, but that's essentially just putting a quantity in a shopping cart and checking out. What they don't realize is that on the back end, that app or that office manager still has to make all those points of contact. As Ross mentioned, what the software both delivery pro is doing is eliminating all of that administrative work. In between. It automates the whole thing, which among other things, just, you know, increases the margins on these products, which, you know, it's delivering dirt. The margins are small to begin with. And introducing this automation, it kind of starts to run itself and folks can make more money doing it.

Justin Angle So what was it like getting the first customer for the software platform?

Ross Peterson We opened a second branch for Little Dumps down in the Bitterroot, and that was helpful for us because it was essentially the first customer. And then we got a customer in Spokane that was really instrumental in helping us, you know, realize we were on to something

because they shared that, you know, they went from having four people in the office Now, after a year of using Bulk Delivery Pro, that four person staff as people moved on in their careers or did whatever, they didn't have to replace them with more staffing that the software has solved those problems of having people sitting there answering the phones.

Justin Angle I'm going to see a light bulb going off, right? Like you're figuring there's got to be more. Yeah, these people checked us out. Wow. How many other people are checking us out? Like Doug, what are your sensations during this time?

Doug Shryock I think we all had our reservations. Is this actually going to work? And I think once Broadway came out, we're like, Gosh, these guys, they're bigger than us. They're more professional. They're, you know, they're really a good customer. And maybe there's one of these. Maybe there's a thousand of these. Yeah. But now the real question is how do we reach them? Because the people that run these landscape suppliers, like any of these business owners, a lot of these guys are really savvy. They're hard workers. But they and I'm generalizing here, do things in a little older school method. You know, they're still using carbon copies. They're a little more resistant to adopt technology. And so then the strategy kind of shifted, like what? What's our sales strategy? How are we going to, you know, now we know it works. And now we're feeling pretty good about ourselves as far as we have, you know, a salable product. You know, what's the next move?

Steve Rice This software is kind of at the intersection of landscaping and trucking. It's this very specific niche. But our customer base has become, you know, there's 3 or 4 different types of customers that we're seeing. You know, you do have landscape supply cards, which are just bins of bulk materials, mulch, topsoil, you know, aggregate decorative rock, that kind of thing. But then you also have nurseries and garden centers, which a lot of these folks, they have a few of these bins in the background right in the back of their store. They have a few mulch is some some garden soil, but that's not necessarily a priority. What they're trying like they're making most of their money off their perennials and their annuals and the stuff that's actually, you know, the living things that people are there to buy. The bulk is kind of a supplemental offering. I mean, you go into some of these rock yards and quarries and it's a converted shipping container that they put there 60 years ago. And it's just chaotic. It's an old school mess. But on the nursery front in particular, what we realize is that this isn't their priority. But there's definitely money to be made in moving earth materials. We can you know, they might have 10 or 12 people in line during the busy season buying grass seed, buying plants, buying, you know, tchotchkes from the, you know, gift center. But then there's somebody in there that just needs two yards of mulch or that they need, you know, a couple of yards of garden soil for their new raised bed. What we've done is essentially streamline that entire customer segment to where there's this one platform that they can plug in to their website and it takes care of the whole bulk operation. You know, they're only making so much margin on that product anyways, but they're needing to devote all this time in customer service at the counter.

Justin Angle So when you guys are making a cold contact, how do you kind of get your foot in the door? What have you learned is the best way to kind of get somebody's attention? Like, okay, I'll listen to this guy who's selling the software.

Ross Peterson We are peers. You know, this is a world that we're deeply invested in now. You know, we really feel like we're uniquely qualified to explain how they could do it easier and better.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Ross Peterson You know, that's if we can get their ears long enough to, like, show them our website, show them our trucks. Show them your fingernails, you know?

Justin Angle Yeah, I mean, the fingernails. I agree. Like having a little common bond around, like being in the industry. And at the same time, Doug, you suggested this before. There's skepticism. Right. It's the people in that container that you mentioned, Steve, that have been doing it this way for a long, long time. They don't see much need to change. How do you kind of break through that resistance?

Steve Rice These are busy folks that are answering the phone all day long. Typically, you know, with four calls that are, hey, I need two yards of this, hey, I need ten tons of gravel, you know. So when you call up and say that you have a new software that they should check out, I

mean, I've had a couple phones hung up on me. I've had a couple of doors slammed in my face. I'm not going to lie. But at the same time, everybody's customer base, they all have smartphones in their pocket. They've all ordered off Amazon. More and more, their customers have come to expect some sort of online convenience in those that are just straight out, you know, resistant to the idea. You know, we kind of just have to move on. That's going to we're going to face that, you know, obstacle that's not going anywhere. But we know that there are those out there that are looking. There are those that have their hand raised looking for a new way to do this. They're only answering the phone 40 hours a week. When somebody is there to answer it, all of a sudden we can turn their website into a platform that works for them, that builds out their schedule for them, that does this, that saves them time and makes them more money. So it's if they give us a minute to stop and think about it, all we're asking is come check out a demo. You know, we'll just just say, you know what's out there. And what I'll often do is say, Hey, I just have an important new product in the industry that I'd love to. You know, I run the landscape supply yards in Montana. I have an important new product. I'd love to just show you. Can I send something over and just allow them to check it out themselves, you know, in kind of that self-discovery where they can be like, these guys really are in this? These guys actually started a landscape supply company in order to build this thing.

Doug Shryock And I think to add to that real quick, I think a lot of these guys know, you know, because obviously their business is customer driven and they know people are ordering everything online now. But in Steve, you see this all the time. I think they need to sit with it for a bit because adopting it's a big change. You're completely rewriting the way you run your

business. You know, all of a sudden you go from this old school, everything on a paper calendar to everything on a smartphone. And so I think a lot of these, you know, older generation owners, they're like, I know we need to do this, but I think it takes them a while, you know, And so the sales cycle is not quick.

Justin Angle You all seem to be committed to continuous learning and excited about that learning. It's like every step of the process, as you've described it, presented an opportunity to learn something new, to figure out a problem. And I can see the excitement there. You know, a lot of people think this is what I do and I do this and I'm good at it and I'm not interested in doing other stuff. But you all seem like you have an openness. I've just love to hear from three of you, like, what have been the highlights and the most significant learnings. Ross, let's start with you.

Ross Peterson Yeah, that one's actually easy for me because I've been for a long time building websites for lots of customers around the state, around the country. And while it was work that I really enjoyed the puzzle of building the code, the design, I felt sometimes like I was solving everybody else's little problem or maybe the problems I was solving for them weren't they just didn't really blow my hair back, so to speak. You know, it wasn't like I could when I shut the lid on my laptop, it was like my work or even my life's work is just kind of contained in that box. And this for me was the first time where I realized, like, I could build something on the web that would directly impact other people's lives, maybe even my own, you know, in the

real world. And so that part has been so fun to make a change in the software and then immediately see somebody in Connecticut implementing it the next week.

Justin Angle Steve, how about you?

Steve Rice I think the coolest for me is forming relationships with our customers that have adopted the platform and learning a little bit about each of their operations. And even though we're all, you know, doing bulk, bulk hauling of some sort, everybody's operational is a little bit different. So, you know, in helping people get onboarded, you know, I'm learning things like, they're next to a major city and they don't take deliveries across town after 2 p.m. because of traffic. You know, pass that along to us and all of a sudden there's a feature that you can shut off a zone, right, for traffic sake. So these little things about different trucks, right? Some trucks have a split gig where they can take two products at once. We have a customer that actually has a truck that has four different compartments. I mean, so everybody's operation is a little bit different. But we all have these commonalities where the more and more we engage with these customers and learn about their operations and kind of find out, you know, what are the common problems, what should we prioritize as far as software development. And then to see those ideas that are, you know, dump trucks on the street, these are the problems. And then there is software that can be created. There's a little feature that can be created to solve that thing. It's just super cool to me. And then, yeah, just helping the customers figure out how to learn, how to use each of these tools and just kind of watch them take off. And the response that we get.

Justin Angle Doug, how about you?

Doug Shryock I think when you do something long enough, whether it could be rocket science, heart surgery, you start to know what to expect every day, regardless of how complicated it is. And I think what's really exciting about this is we're constantly getting thrown curveballs that we really have to sit back and be like, man, we didn't see that one coming. And you don't you know, we still even at this point, like we know we have a good, viable product, but we don't necessarily know what's going to happen going forward. And me personally, I find that kind of exciting. You know, you don't know where the end of the runway is. And then also going back to helping people like we, you know, this is more for little dumps, but obviously using the software. We have an old lady who's 72. I think she has ordered probably 50,000 pounds of gravel. Wow. At this point. And just to see that, you know, that was the blockage in the system and this ability to, you know, to provide a service to somebody that otherwise would have a really tough time. And then on the flip side, now they are able to do whatever project they want to do. It's kind of nice to see that you're doing something that's helping the community.

Steve Rice One of the cool things that we learn is how to use these materials, right? Like all of a sudden we have this community in Missoula and I don't know if folks know this, but our local Missoula customers have helped us do all this. Right there, they're ordering from us daily and we get to bring their rocks, to bring their garden. So all these things. But all of a sudden we see these really cool projects that we didn't realize that people could do with some of these

bulk materials. I mean, the fire in the fire pits that we've seen, other people doing bocce ball courts, Zen, you know, Japanese rock gardens, stuff like that. I had one gal building a softball mound, a pitcher's mound for her daughter who was in high school so she could train in the backyard. I mean, just stuff that you wouldn't necessarily think of. You know, when you go and see aggregate in a bin. You know, at first we solved this problem. Like how do you get local rock, How do you get local sand or whatever. But then all of a sudden we've flipped and it's become local citizens being like, sweet Little Dumps can bring me any of this stuff. Like they have the opportunity to explore their creativity. Be like, Well, what can I build? What can I do? We should definitely plant that new garden because it's easy to get really nice organic soil, that kind of thing. That part's also been really rewarding.

Justin Angle Well, I can't thank you enough for coming in here and sharing the story. I think it's a fantastic story for so many reasons. You guys provide a great service and I think you're such a quintessential Montana story of how you've kind of got your way from one industry and to the next and focused on learning and giving back to the community and all the right virtues. So best of luck and yeah, all the best.

Ross Peterson We so appreciate it. Thanks.

Doug Shryock Thanks so much.

Steve Rice Thanks so much.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. If you like what we do and want to support us directly, please consider a subscription at www.anewanglepodcast.com. We're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums Michele and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business. With additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer, Maddie Jorden is our production assistant. VTO Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.