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Business Technology

Searching for Clients From Above

More Small Businesspeople Use Aerial Mapping Services To Scout Potential Customers

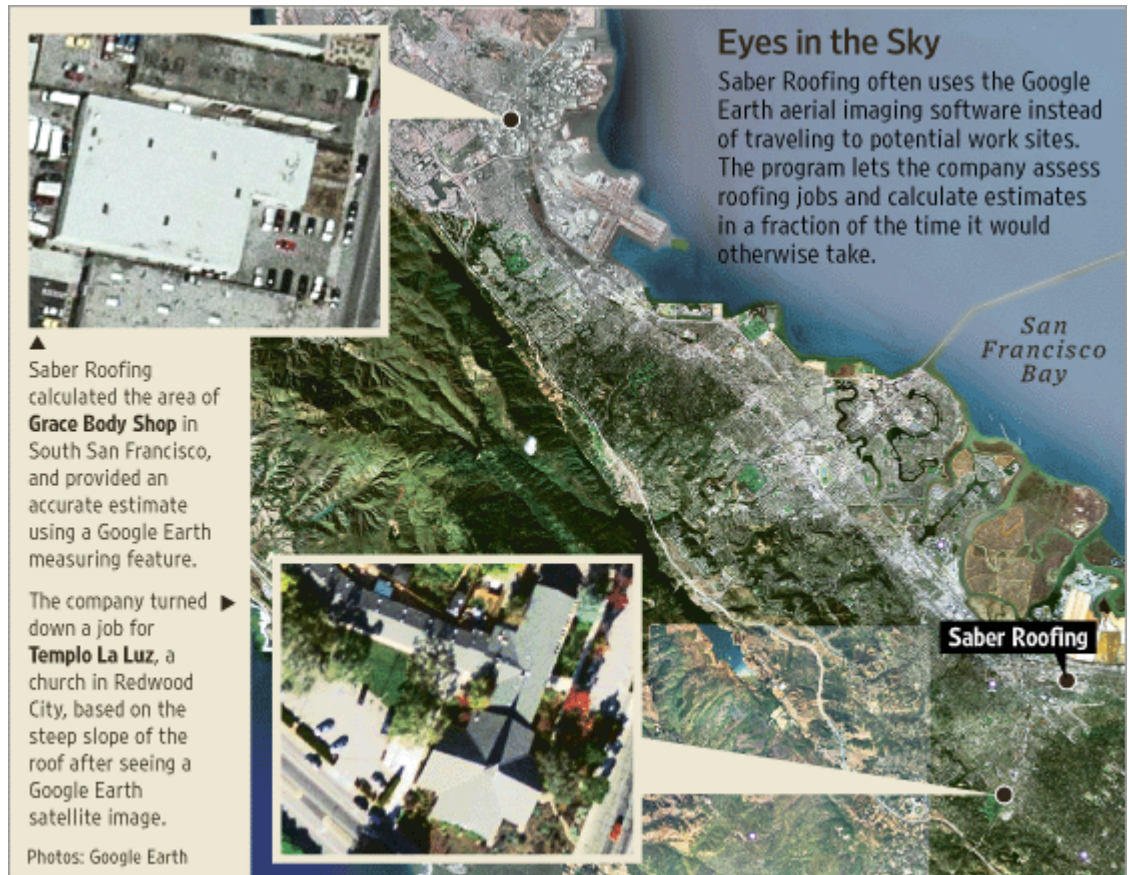
 By **KEVIN J. DELANEY**
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When a customer recently inquired about roofing five apartment buildings in Grass Valley, Calif., Jay Saber didn't bother to jump in his truck to drive out and take measurements.


Mr. Saber, the owner of Saber Roofing Inc. in Redwood City, Calif., instead punched the addresses into **Google** Inc.'s free Earth software to pull up aerial views of the buildings. He used the program to measure the roofs and eyeball their conditions. After he determined that the job would cost more than \$100,000, he emailed the estimate to the client the next day.

The software saved Mr. Saber a roughly 350-mile round trip to see the roofs in person. "Instead of nine hours, I spent 10 minutes on the computer," he says.

Many small businesspeople like Mr. Saber are turning to Google Earth and other mapping services with aerial imagery such as **Microsoft** Corp.'s Live Search Maps and closely held Zillow.com to find new clients, estimate job costs and inspect properties, saving time they would have spent driving around.



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Those services provide

access to aerial images of buildings taken by airplanes and satellites, and in some cases let users extract measurements and other useful data as well. Businesses in the past could buy aerial photos, but the cost and time required to find the images, or commission someone to take specific shots, put them out of the reach of most mom-and-pop companies. Microsoft's Live Search Maps and Zillow.com, a real-estate site with extensive aerial imagery, are Web-based. Google Earth requires a software download, though the related Google Maps service is Web-based. The services are all free of charge, although premium versions of Google Earth cost \$20 a year or more.

Roofers aren't the only ones taking advantage of aerial mapping -- landscapers, pool maintenance people, real-estate agents and insurance companies are also using such services. In some cases, they're checking out specific locations where they're bidding for or working on a job. In others, they're perusing the images for signs -- such as pools or big lawns -- indicating homes that might be potential clients for their services. Some of the mapping services are now adding photographs of buildings and streets taken from the street level, potentially increasing their usefulness to small businesspeople.

While the aerial images can be as much as a few years old, things such as roofs and the areas of lawns generally don't change much over that period of time. And the small businesses often find the tools provided by the mapping services are accurate enough for their purposes. Mr. Saber says he recently was within 50 square feet of accuracy measuring a 10,000-square-foot San Francisco roof using Google Earth that he later measured in person, which he deems remarkably good.



A water treatment complex seen from Google Earth. Keith Harper of Summer101 Lawn Care, Chattanooga, Tenn., used the service to scout jobs.

Keith Harper of Chattanooga, Tenn., has used Google Earth to prospect for large lawns for his landscaping business to mow. Mr. Harper a few years ago discovered three lawns, each about two acres large, while scouting in Google Earth for potential clients in his neighborhood. The next day he knocked on the homeowners' doors and landed a contract to mow one of them, for a price of around \$80 per mow. "I knew the area, just hadn't realized they were there," says Mr. Harper.

Looking for homes that might be interested in his pressure-washing services, Mr. Harper also used Google Earth to find houses with concrete patios. Such patios are normally made of lighter-colored concrete, so they are visible when zooming in on Google Earth; Mr. Harper says he found several clients this way.

George Wittren, who has a landscape design business in Renton, Wash., takes property measurements using Google Earth and looks at the surrounding environment with Zillow.com. "It saves my clients a little bit of money, just in terms of minimizing site visits a little more and saving time," Mr. Wittren says.

Even companies that potentially compete with Google and others to provide aerial images to businesses are themselves using the free software. Stockton Infrared Thermographic Services Inc., Randleman, N.C., takes high-resolution and infrared aerial images of buildings that it sells to clients. President Gregory Stockton says the custom infrared images can offer more detail than Google Earth for service providers, such as the condition of roofs and the effectiveness of building insulation. But his company also uses Google Earth to plan out image-gathering flights and check the measurement of roofs it plans to photograph. "It's very, very handy," Mr. Stockton says.

Meanwhile, Whitegold Solutions Inc. in San Rafael, Calif., employs about 75 people in India to analyze aerial

images from Google Earth and other sources. Using information gleaned from the images, Whitegold's precigeo service offers customers the addresses of prospective clients in specific areas that meet certain criteria -- such as pool owners or people with large lawns.

President Jack Zoken says precigeo customers include lawn-care companies, roofers, insurance company adjusters and solar panel installers. He says Whitegold's custom software tools and specialized staff make it more efficient in analyzing the images than its clients would be on their own. He wouldn't be specific about how much the company charges customers, saying the price varies.

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But some small businesses find they can get real value out of free aerial imaging services without such help. In addition to using Google Earth for jobs, for example, Saber Roofing also relies on it to decline them. Terry Nagel, the mayor of Silicon Valley town Burlingame, Calif., says she called Saber last year about roofing her home. While she was on the phone, a Saber employee told her he was looking at her roof using Google Earth and that it was too steep for his company to tackle.

Ms. Nagel says she found another roofer to handle the job, but was surprised by the experience. "It sort of gives you a feeling that Big Brother is watching," she says.

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