

# Denece Messenger

**T**HE CAREER PATH Denece Messenger took to the green industry is an unconventional one. “I went from broadcasting to bark,” she said.

Until 1992, she was a television journalist, appearing on Portland channels 8 (KGW) and 6 (KOIN). “Broadcasters usually have a short shelf life, plus you have to work holidays and I had young kids, so I decided I just couldn’t do it anymore,” Denece said.

Next she worked in public relations for Providence Portland Medical Center, a job she loved, but then a cancer diagnosis forced her to take time off from her career. That’s when her family said, “Why don’t you come work for us?”

In 1998, Denece’s father founded Decorative Bark Products, extending the family’s more than 50-year legacy working in Oregon’s lumber industry.

“I grew up with grandparents who had missing fingers — they all worked in lumber yards,” Denece recalled. “Growing up, I just thought grandparents didn’t have all their digits!”

Today, Denece leads Decorative Bark’s sales efforts. She estimates that she puts about 45,000–50,000 miles on her vehicle every year, driving to lumber mills and meeting with a wide variety of customers.

Decorative Bark’s coverage area extends over the whole Willamette Valley. The business has 24 employees spread over three locations: a home office in Tualatin and two strategically placed production yards: one in Boring to the north, and another in Lyons to the south. Its fleet of trucks delivers a wide range of bark products to nurseries, retail garden centers, landscapers,



**AGE** 60  
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ranchers and farmers.

Denece also serves a vital role at the Oregon Association of Nurseries, as chairwoman of the Farwest Show Committee.

“Broadcasting was cutthroat, very competitive. In television, you’d never collaborate with the station across the street. In the newsroom, you always had to look over your shoulder,” Denece said. “Our industry is so pleasant by comparison. We work and play well together.”

**What are you most looking forward to at this year’s Farwest Show?** Everyone has really put their creativity into this year’s show: the ad campaign is so fun! I’ve been on the committee for a number of years, and it’s great to see the buzz come back like when the industry was red-hot before the

recession. It was hard during that time, because people were just holding on, struggling to keep their business open, which made it hard to get people jazzed about the show.

Now there’s a real resurgence. Having lived through the bad times, it’s just great to see things come back. I think what we’re feeling in the industry right now feels good. Things are back in living color. People are optimistic, plants are selling, people are excited about Farwest — there’s real energy and momentum again. This year’s show should be a lot of fun.

**What are your favorite parts about the show?** I just can’t think of another setting where you can be in one room — really it’s a big garden — with so much potential to buy or sell. Farwest is a chance to

## MEET THE LEADER

Interview by Peter Szymczak  
 Photo by Jeffrey Busch

reconnect with customers and meet potential customers, plus our city has so much to offer. The tours showcase our beautiful country in action as we’re growing things. There are just so many benefits — and don’t forget the Pub Crawl!

**How has belonging to OAN benefitted you and your business?** Having served on OAN committees for more than a decade, I’ve seen the titans of our industry get together over the same table and share information. The spirit of collaboration is tremendous. It sets a tone. I’ve belonged to other trade associations, but the OAN really makes us stronger. As a small businessperson, it’s offered me Lean engineering, CPR and first aid classes — the nuts and bolts. The sum of the parts makes the greater whole.

**How is the world of bark different from broadcasting?** As a journalist, I always loved words and their ability to tell stories. In business, numbers tell stories. I never thought that I had any business love in me, but I’ve enjoyed this journey, learning about cash flow, poor debts, supply and employees.

**Have elements of your broadcast career carried over?** In business and sales, you have to be able to read people quickly. Because I spent years and years asking questions as a journalist, I tend to ask my customers a lot of questions, which helps me meet their needs. Listening to what they’re saying, I can better deliver to them what they’re looking for.

Also, in television I 

## Meet the Leader: Denece Messenger

dealt with highly intelligent, driven, sometimes emotional people. That carries over to dealing with employees. You have to learn how to work with people and motivate individuals — people matter!

### What was the best business decision you've ever made?

On a personal level, I stopped thinking that I had to be “one of the guys” to succeed.

Business-wise, when our sales started to take a hit in 2008, I realized it was a trend and cut our next year's budget by 50 percent. I said, “That's what we're going to have to live on.” Being lean helped us make it through.

The other thing was not

carrying any debt. We may not have had the prettiest equipment, but it was in good working order and paid for, which made us fairly recession-proof. We've always wanted to be the low-cost provider, so that's forced me to be lean as well.

Anyone who made it through the years 2008–2011 has been changed. We think of business differently now. We pay attention to cash and economic indicators. I'm much more cautious and conservative.

### What are the biggest business challenges you're experiencing right now?

Labor-wise, it's really hard to find people in the trades — mechanics, for example. The old logging

mechanics could dig into a wheel loader, turn around and do an in-frame on a Cummins engine. The new mechanics plug into a computer and say, “Oh, there's your problem.”

And there are just a lot of external pressures on all of us in small business. A lot of new laws have been thrust on us very quickly — paid time off, the minimum wage hike, overtime exemptions for salaried workers, heavy use tax .... When \$15 becomes the new minimum wage, it's going to have an upward spiraling effect that will put pressure on us to pay more across the board.

### What do you like about working in the green

**industry?** It's been refreshing to work with people who take pride in what they do. We build things with our hands every day in our industry — planting plants, grafting — and in some of the most beautiful parts of the state, where you can really breathe the air.

**What are you most proud about?** Our company has very little turnover in a very dynamic industry. The customers also appreciate that. They know our drivers and equipment operators by name.

**What advice do you live by?** This life is not a dress rehearsal or trial run .... Live accordingly. ☺



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