

Social Media Marketing

Use these no-cost or low-cost tools to drive business

By Rob McNealy

With the wood flooring industry trampled by the economy, many contractors are doing everything and anything they can to save a penny, including making the most efficient use of their marketing dollars. Fortunately, there is a variety of free and inexpensive tools to market your business online using social media. I use all of them to drive business to my wood floor contracting company, and because so few wood flooring companies do it, it's a real competitive advantage. Here's a summary of ways to use social media to boost your business.

What Are Social Media?

Social media are media designed to be distributed through social interaction. What this means is that mainstream media no longer control access to publishing and distribution. Contractors can easily and freely create their own content and distribute it to the masses. This paradigm shift means that advertising via the Web literally can replace phone book, newspaper, radio and television advertising.

Blogging

Blogging is the act of writing and publishing content on the Web. Many Web sites are run as blogs on free software called WordPress, which is great because anyone can use it to make site updates through a Web browser without having any programming or Web design skills. Blogging is a great way for potential customers to get to know you. Post things like pictures from your projects and testimonials, as well as cleaning and maintenance tips. If you are not sure where to start, think about the most commonly asked questions you get from your customers. Blogging is also a great way to raise your Web site's ranking in search engines. Regular blogging provides fresh content, which is important in search engine algorithms.

Local Directories

All the major search engines—Yelp, Yahoo!, Bing and Google—now have local business directories with customer reviews. It is important that you add your business to these sections. It's even more important to ask your customers to review you on these sites. These sites are heavily ranked in search engines, and the more positive reviews you receive, the more visible your site will be in the search engine results.

YouTube

YouTube is the second-most-searched site behind Google. Video is critical in social media. Take short videos of your projects and post them to your YouTube channel. Once they are posted, embed them inside a blog

BUSINESS BRIEFS

Maintaining Morale

In these overworked, understaffed times, it's easy for managers to come across like Ben Hur's Quintus Arrius talking to Roman slaves: "... We keep you alive to serve this ship, so row well and live!" You're likely to come across as a leader who believes that everybody is lucky to have a job, so they better suck it up, keep their noses to the grindstone and not complain. Sadly, making your employees feel like they're only on board to row is killing your productivity today. Here are five suggestions to help you avoid destroying morale:



- 1) Form relationships built on trust
- 2) Show them respect
- 3) Nurture creativity
- 4) Build effective teams
- 5) Be genuine and honest.

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post on your Web site. This will cross-pollinate the sites and drive more traffic to your Web site. Shooting video is easy and can be done cheaply. I recommend using a small Flip Video camcorder, which is inexpensive, the size of an iPod and easy to operate. All you have to do is plug it into your computer to automatically upload your videos to the Web.

Facebook

With over 400 million active users, Facebook is the largest and most popular social networking platform on the Internet. By joining Facebook, you'll have the ability to set up a profile for you and a "fan page" for your business. You can increase interest in your Facebook fan page by offering special promotions that are available exclusively to your fans. Facebook also offers an inexpensive pay-per-click or pay-per-impression advertising program. You can advertise a page from your own Web site or your Facebook profile, and customize your ad with an image and a text description. Facebook allows you to target specific user demographics by location, age, gender, education level, interests and employers. Ads can cost as little as \$0.01 per click or \$0.10 per 1,000 impressions. Daily bud-


gets can start as low as \$5.

Craigslist

Craigslist is a (mostly) free, no-frills online classified site that is particularly useful for service providers. In fact, it's so useful that when I started my wood flooring business five years ago, I generated all my initial business just from Craigslist, for free. If you're starting out and looking to advertise without spending a lot of time on profile management and relationship building, Craigslist can be invaluable. You can post about services and products offered by your business, as well as recruit new hires, or engage in social networking through its discussion forums.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is like a search engine for people. You can post a free profile about yourself and your business, which will be searchable by over 50 million users globally. LinkedIn also offers advertising opportunities that can cost as little as \$12 per 1,000 impressions. You can target your ads to reach business professionals in a set demographic, or you can create your own custom target that can be tuned to specific local areas or keywords.



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Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging tool that allows users to post blurbs of 140 characters or less. It is great for developing relationships with potential customers and servicing your existing customer base. You can use Twitter search tools to see who is talking about your company or industry and “follow” those users to get in on the conversation. You can also use tools and plugins that allow you to display your Twitter posts on your Web site, or provide links to your latest blog posts to your friends on Twitter.

Posting Tools

With so many sites and profiles, cross-posting can be a daunting task. The great thing is that there are free tools that allow you to post to multiple social media sites simultaneously. My favorite is TweetDeck, which is both easy to use and free. It works on Macs, Windows, and iPhones.

Action Plan

Just getting started? Here’s what I suggest:

1. Set up all of your social media accounts.

2. Post links to all of your social media profiles on your Web site or blog.

3. Post content regularly, and then post links to that content to your social media profiles.

The more footprints you have in social media, the more likely it is search engines will drive traffic to your site. If you have a strong online presence with information that shows off your wood flooring expertise, it instills confidence in customers about your business. I’m in Denver, but I’ve had consumers call me from as far away as the Bahamas and the Philippines asking for advice because they found my sites online. I may not be doing floors in the Bahamas, but those consumers have referred friends in Denver to me for their floors. ■

Rob McNealy is an NWFACP-certified wood flooring inspector and owner of Natural Wood Floors in Denver, Colo. McNealy and his wife, Kristie, also run Contrived Media, a social media marketing consulting company. Rob is author of the flooring blog AskAFloorGuy.com, a frequent radio guest on the subject of green building and flooring, and has also been featured in three episodes of the DIY network’s “Cool Tools.”

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