

Notebook...

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EDITED BY TED CUSHMAN

Reaching Customers via the Internet

by James Leatherwood and Ted Cushman

If you believe all the hype, Internet marketing is the wave of the future. But does it work for contractors in the here and now? As far as we can tell, results are mixed. A “presence” on the Internet — whether accomplished by creating a home page on the World Wide Web or by participating in e-mail forums or discussions in Usenet newsgroups — will put you in touch with a lot of people. But since contracting is a local business, the nationwide contacts you can make via the Internet don’t often result in sales.

Ken Twining, an electrical contractor in Maryland, says his home page on the World Wide Web has brought him just “a handful of customers.”

Michael Halpern, an Atlanta designer and

builder who is active on CompuServe forums, has gained only one customer as a direct result of his activity online. Mainly, he says, he enjoys talking with people around the world about housing-related issues.

Listening to customers. The online world, however, is a great place to learn what’s on the typical customer’s mind. Usenet newsgroups, which predate the Web by more than a decade but are accessible through Web browsers, are a rich vein of information. On the *misc.consumers.house* group, for instance, conversations (known as “threads”) cover topics like how to choose a remodeler or builder, or things buyers wish their builders had told them during the job.

These discussions can provide good clues to typical customer desires, popular tastes, and common questions or misconceptions. Building and remodeling

customers often consult the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) file from the group — a section known as “Wish-I-Hads” is full of suggestions for the kinds of little touches buyers appreciate.

Plugging yourself. While newsgroups are a good place to meet and greet the world, they’re not the place to advertise your company. Users of the non-commercial Usenet resent advertising there, and anyone posting a commercial plug may get pelted with hostile replies (“flames”).

Wisconsin contractor Bill Mackie innocently posted a plug for his company, All Pro Construction, on the *misc.consumers.house* newsgroup when he had just discovered the group. Mackie didn’t get any “flames,” but he did get a polite message from a group of experienced users at Duke University, explaining the difference between the commercial and noncommercial parts of the Internet. Advertising on a newsgroup, the message pointed out, is like standing up to plug your business at a school board meeting or similar forum: “If this happened over and over again, it would soon become difficult to hold effective meetings.”

Mentioning your business or professional expertise in a discussion posting is fine if it’s kept low-key — the best technique is to contribute your advice or opinions, then tell your audience how to reach you privately via an e-mail address or phone number.

The message from the Duke group offered helpful suggestions on how to set up a site on the World Wide Web, where advertising is welcome. And if you want to learn more about “nondestructive ways to use Usenet for your commercial purposes,” the group welcomes e-mail inquiries addressed to *commerce@acpub.duke.edu*.

The middle ground. Moderated e-mail forums like Steve Mosenson’s “old house” mailing list offer a middle way between the commercialized Web and the strictly amateur but definitely rough-and-tumble Usenet. Mosenson discourages self-promotion on his group, but he says everybody benefits from contacts between homeowners and professional contractors. And while a lively discussion is welcome, Mosenson firmly advises participants that “flaming” is out. 

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Newsgroup discussions cover a wide range of trivial and serious topics. Advertising is frowned on, but contacts between homeowners and contractors are productive for both sides.

Insulated Steel Door Burns Toddler

Sun Heated Black Surface to 160°F

It may take hours of direct sunlight to give a person a bad sunburn. But concentrated and stored solar heat can burn skin in seconds. That's the sad lesson learned by the parents of an 11-month-old

Atlanta child who received first- and second-degree burns from a foam-core steel door that had been painted black.

According to the child's mother, Tracy Clement, the toddler's forehead, hands, nose, and forearm were burned when she leaned against the west-facing door (see photos). Fire department investigators identified the door as the cause of the injury when bits of the girl's skin were found adhered to its dark surface.

"Even on the way to the hospital after the paramedics called, I was thinking, 'It's just my front door, how bad could this be?'" says Clement. "But at the emergency room, I said, 'Oh my God!' She had bulbous blisters a half inch deep on her fingertips. Her epidermis was almost gone."

An overhanging roof protected the door from some of the sun's rays. However, at the child's

height, the dark surface took the full brunt of the setting sun for several hours. A few weeks later, says Clement, an engineer friend found that in direct sunlight, the door would reach 160°F in under six minutes, while adjacent light-colored materials remained cool to the touch.

"People think this is a freak accident, but it's not," says Clement. "Dark doors are common in this area."

A neighbor received a similar burn from a dark-painted metal door when he returned home with a bag of groceries, Clement reports: Pushing the door open with his knee, he was burned badly enough to raise a large blister.

The Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) says it has received no other reports of this type of injury. According to a steel door manufacturer, the units are generally shipped with a gray primer coat and painted according to the homeowner's or builder's choice. No codes or safety regulations are known to cover the color of insulated doors, but builders can draw a clear lesson from this event: Insulated metal doors, if exposed to sun, should be finished in light colors to reflect solar radiation.



An Atlanta toddler who touched a steel door heated by sunlight received surprisingly severe burns, her parents report.



Offcuts...

The fiberboard of the future may be a wheat-straw panel. Canada's Isobord Enterprises, Inc., has broken ground on a Manitoba plant that will churn out 250 million square feet of straw-based particleboard per year. Isobord panels will be formaldehyde-free, water resistant, and dimensionally stable, says a company exec, offering MDF-like machinability at the price of ordinary particleboard. Products built with the new material will hit home centers in first-quarter 1999.

Western red cedar may be scarce this year, according to the Western Red Cedar Lumber Association: Mills expect a 5% to 10% drop in output for 1997. A depressed pulp market has slowed harvest of the rot-resistant wood, which grows in mixed stands along with pulpwood species. Heavy winter snows, increasing restrictions on Canadian foresters, and trade quotas on Canadian wood share the blame for the shortage.

Pull over, Rover: Talking on the cellular phone while you drive quadruples your chances of having an accident at that moment, concludes a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. The study analyzed the phone billing records of 669 drivers who owned cell phones and were involved in major collisions. On the bright side, the researchers noted, 39% of the study subjects were able use their mobile phone to call for help after the crash.

Builders Move to Adopt Performance Guidelines

The Home Builders Association of Maryland (HBAM) has become the nation's first HBA to endorse the *Residential Construction Performance Guidelines for Professional Builders and Remodelers*, recently published by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). According to builder/remodeler Dwight Griffith, a former HBAM president, the new standards are intended to eliminate the confusion surrounding construction disputes by providing an authoritative definition of accepted quality standards for the industry.

Griffith, who spearheaded an early push in Maryland to develop accepted standards, says his interest in performance guidelines grows from his experience as an arbitrator in numerous construction disputes. "One side would have five experts saying one thing, and the other side would have five experts

saying the opposite," he explains, "but nobody would have any objective standard to refer to."

Atlanta-based mediator Bob Merz coordinated the NAHB process, which culminated in the recently published standards manual. A wide range of professional groups, including subcontractor industry organizations and construction defect litigators, contributed to the guidelines. "This has been reviewed by the best builders in the country," says Griffith.

The guidelines cover all phases of construction, from site work and landscaping to mechanicals and interior finishes. The book will be reviewed and updated with each printing, notes Griffith. He encourages builders to incorporate the book by reference into their contracts with customers and subs, and also to use it in their sales promotions. "This protects us from an unreasonable consumer," explains Griffith, "and it also enables us to distinguish ourselves from poor-quality builders who give the industry a bad name."

Copies of the *Residential Construction Performance Guidelines* are available from the NAHB Bookstore (800/223-2665) for \$43.75 plus \$7.00 shipping and handling.



Homeowner Group Offers Standard Remodeling Contract

If you're a remodeler, you may soon start to encounter a new standard contract developed by the American Homeowners Foundation (AHF), in Arlington, Va. The six-page "Model Home Remodeling Contract" is written in simple English and covers description of the work, price, work schedule, payment schedule, change orders, and grievance procedure. Remodelers who have seen the AHF contract give it mixed reviews: While it is simple and clear, it may not suit every contractor's purposes.

Virginia remodeler David Merrill described the AHF contract as a good starting point. "It's a lot better than the ones you see in the stationery store," he said, but he noted, "You really need to get an attorney from your own state to review the details of any standard contract."

For example, in many states remodeling contracts are unenforceable unless they contain a "right to rescission" notice informing the customers that they have a short grace period during which they can decide to back out of the agreement. This element is missing from the AHF contract, and failing to include it may relieve the customer of the obligation to pay for the work.

Another Virginia remodeler, Ben Osborne, liked the AHF contract's clause requiring arbitration or mediation of disputes. But Osborne was less pleased with a provision making the remodeler responsible for added job costs resulting from unforeseen site or soil conditions. And Osborne said he would not accept a provision that, in the event the contractor fails to complete the work, the contractor must pay the homeowner for any excess cost (including attorney's fees) incurred while having the job completed by another contractor. "This contract is written to protect the homeowner," said Osborne. "My contract is written to protect me."

For information or to order copies of the AHF contract (\$7.95 apiece, \$4.95 each for two or more), contact American Homeowners Foundation (6676 Little Falls Rd., Arlington, VA 22213; 800/489-7776).



Technology Update: Foundation Jacking

Soft soils and settling foundations have written the epitaph for many a construction project. But sites with ideal soils are growing scarcer and more expensive, tempting builders to risk projects on marginal sites. And abandoning a building



Chance's system relies on helical piers (left) inserted into holes around the foundation. Power equipment screws the piers into the ground (right) until resistance indicates that good bearing is achieved.

because of foundation flaws may not be an acceptable choice for the owners.

When soils can't support a conventional foundation, advanced technology can sometimes save the day. At least two companies offer foundation jacking systems that can lift cracked and settled footings back to the original grade and hold them there. Applied at the beginning of new foundation work, these systems can provide secure bearing even in weak soils.

Helical piers. A.B. Chance's system relies on helical piers that screw into the ground. The Chance technique has received evaluation reports from all three model code organizations, allowing it to be applied in most areas without case-by-case approval.

In a repair situation, crews excavate around the existing footing and screw the helical piers into the earth with heavy-duty power tools. By measuring the torque resistance as the piers reach deeper soil strata, engineers can estimate each pier's bearing capacity.

When sufficient bearing is achieved, the piers are connected to lifting brackets attached to the footings. Hydraulic jacks then slowly raise the founda-

tion to the desired point, and the piers are pinned permanently to the brackets.

Ram Jack. Out of Oklahoma and Texas comes an alternative method, the Ram Jack system from Advanced Building Technology, Inc. Ram Jack's steel piers are driven, not screwed, into the earth with hydraulic pressure. Resistance to insertion is used to gauge the piers' bearing capacity, but in some cases piers are driven all the way to bedrock.

Once the piers are attached to bearing brackets, jacks raise the building to the desired point. A hydraulic manifold system equipped with computerized controls enables an entire structure — even a large multifamily building — to be raised in one smooth, controlled lift.

Some wood-frame homes might be too light to work with this system, according to Ram Jack's literature: The building has to be heavy enough to supply reaction force for driving the piers. For the lightest wood homes, Ram Jack advises opting for helical piers.

Call the experts. Whatever system you choose, foundation jacking isn't a casual affair. Cost will vary widely depending on how many piers are called for and how much excavation is needed, and retrofit work will always cost much more than new construction. Your first step should be to bring in a qualified engineering company — you'll need their expertise (and their liability insurance).

Chance has a dozen authorized distributors and 200 authorized dealers nationwide, all company trained and certified. If you can't find one in the Yellow Pages, contact the A.B. Chance Company (210 N. Allen, Centralia, MO 65240; 573/682-8379).

Ram Jack is currently expanding from its southwestern U.S. base into the rest of the country, but not



Ram Jack employs a sophisticated hydraulic lifting system for smoothly raising large, heavy structures.

all areas currently have qualified crews. For more information, contact Advanced Building Technology, Inc. (2600 Creve Coeur Dr., St. Louis, MO 63144; 314/962-0030), or check out the company's informative Web site (www.piering.com).

