

Business

Defining Your Niche Can Help in Downtimes

by Greg DiBernardo

I specialize in custom decks. I switched to this niche last winter, when my backlog of general remodeling work dried up and I had no jobs on the horizon. The suburbs of New York City — where my business is located — were hit hard by the economic downturn; many GCs I knew were going out of business. The pages of the local paper had become so cluttered with notices for other, equally desperate contractors that my own ad was lost — not a recipe for success.

The only way I could get leads, I realized, was to focus my efforts on one specific type of work. That way, I'd be more than a face in the crowd — I'd be the expert in my field. Instead of dealing with the time-consuming odd-ball tasks that came with every general remodeling project, we'd be repeating — and perfecting — the same tasks again and again, increasing our efficiency and profitability. The trick was to find the niche that would work best for me and my market.

Choosing a Specialty

I recognized fairly quickly that specializing in custom decks was a good fit. As a GC, my favorite kind of project was building decks; it was challenging and rewarding physically and mentally. We could get in, get out, and get paid fast. There was seldom anything to special-order, no subcontractors to deal with, nothing for the client to make changes to during the work, and almost no way for us to get bogged down.

Also, decks were more profitable for my remodeling company than any other type of project, thanks to the markup I was able to maintain on premium synthetic decking components. We could always count on a synthetic decking and railing materials order to provide thousands of dollars in markup — even on small jobs.

Moreover, it didn't take much research to figure out that the custom deck building market in my region was underserved. In fact, I knew of no specialty deck contractors in the area. Since I already had a lot of experience building decks, I was confident that it wouldn't take long for me to become *the* deck builder for homeowners

who really cared about quality and aesthetics.

My emphasis on quality led to another important decision: I'd restrict my business to synthetic and tropical hardwood decks. Around here, only budget-minded customers choose pressure-treated decks — and frankly, they can't afford me. Competing with budget pricing just doesn't pay.

Using the Internet

Once I'd chosen a specialty, generating deck leads became my mission in life. Without a steady flow of leads, my business would be dead in the water. Advertising in the newspaper was a good start — but today my typical client is using the Internet to find everything, contractors included. I knew I had to have an Internet presence that was prominent and easy for prospects to find.

Since I didn't want leads from outside my area, I geared my entire Web site toward my locale, Bergen County, N.J. I secured a geographic-specific domain name with the word “decks” in it — BergenDecks.com — and made sure the site itself contained the names of all the townships where I wanted to work, as well as the kinds of keywords consumers would be likely to type into a search engine. I also tried to create a highly informative, useful Web site that would generate leads on its own.

Another way I harnessed the Internet's power was by making sure I was listed on every single locally available decking manufacturer's Web site as a qualified installer. Some companies send leads directly to my e-mail inbox; others just list me on a Web page and have the customers contact me directly. While many building-products Web sites have “find a contractor” sections, the deck industry is really setting the pace for this type of cross-marketing. Now it's not uncommon for a prospect to call me on the phone, contact me through a manufacturer's Web site, and contact me through my Web site all on the same day! That type of customer is just begging to be sold a deck.

I also made a point from the beginning to frequent online forums geared toward contractors. On the Internet, keywords rule — so most of my 5,000-plus postings

Business | Defining Your Niche Can Help in Downtimes

involve conversations about decks or deck-building techniques. By putting the URL for my business in the signature line of my posts, I've exponentially increased my Google score, making it even easier for customers to find me.

Selling Your Expertise

Some kinds of projects are harder to sell than others. I made sure to pick a niche I knew I could excel at selling once I'd converted leads into appointments.

As a specialty contractor, my goal is to be the local authority on my trade. When I walk into a sales appointment, I know I need to make it absolutely clear that hiring anyone else would be a mistake the homeowner would regret, because we would do the best job. Early on, I resolved

to make my presentations the most professional ones the customers would see — so much so that they'd forget about everybody else's.

The more you do something, the better you get at it. Sales is no exception. One of the benefits of selling what is essentially the same project over and over is that I can constantly refine my sales techniques. I never have to change gears and research alternative products. I have the answers to any and every question a prospect could possibly ask me — and I know that gives me an edge, because numerous clients have told me how impressed they were with my presentation skills, and how easy it was to communicate with me compared with the other contractors they interviewed.

The Future

The decision to specialize was a calculated risk; to date, it's turned out well. I've been moving smoothly from project to project, with enough leads coming in to keep two to four future jobs under contract.

True, I recently had two separate clients postpone signing off on large deck jobs because their stock portfolios had been hit hard in recent weeks. But there are still customers who have the funds to move ahead with their projects, so I am confident that I will stay busy through the winter and survive the downturn.

Greg DiBernardo owns *Fine Home Improvements of Waldwick LLC*, in Waldwick, N.J.