

# Position Your Business for Better Times

by Bob Lett

**I**t's no secret the current economic environment is tough, no matter what business you're in. Amid the turmoil of the failing auto industry, the failing housing industry, and the failing financial industry, it's easy to panic.

Don't. Even though it may be hard to imagine right now, the economy will improve, and when it does, you'll want to be in a position to take advantage of it. The best way to do that is to stay on top of issues we've always faced in the deck-building industry, like competing with low-cost, low-

(your customer's or your crew's), or quality. That's the best way to differentiate yourself.

Maintain professionalism in every client interaction. If you say you are going to stop by at 3 p.m., for example, be there at three. Standing up clients is something "Chuck" does, not something a professional does. Ever.

Stress safety with clients. If you read this magazine, you understand both the importance of and the techniques for installing and flashing ledgers so decks stay attached to the house. You know how to install rail-

and appearance, in their decision making. You might have to suggest a smaller or simpler deck or less expensive materials to stay within your customer's budget and explain that quality workmanship isn't something you're willing to sacrifice.

Sometimes the right decision for the customers may be to put off a project for a year or so, until they can afford a quality product. Simply stated, it's better for the customers to have it done right the first time than to have to pay for a second deck or for extensive repairs on a shoddy initial project. And it's better for you to walk away entirely than put your hard-earned reputation at risk by cutting quality.

Once you establish yourself as a professional supplier of a high-quality product, market yourself that way. Sell your success with references from satisfied customers. If you offer a warranty, talk about it. A few months after you finish a deck, follow up with your customers to make sure they are still satisfied with the deck you delivered. A phone call or a note is fine — either one is probably more than their neighbor got from Chuck-in-a-truck.

## Keep Pace With New Products

The modern consumer demands choice — from a rainbow of colors in Kitchen Aid mixers to the diversity of interior options on a new SUV. Deck builders should work to give their potential customers a similar array of choices. The railing industry in particular has recently introduced a number of new products that combine modern materials with

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quality contractors, keeping up with new products, and navigating clients' budget concerns. (Indeed, it's likely that this last one is going to be top of mind for some time.) The techniques for addressing these challenges aren't much different in today's poor economy than in past economic booms, but applying them is more critical for the survival of your business.

## Differentiate Yourself From Competitors

At one time or another, every quality professional deck builder goes head to head with a lower-cost, lower-quality contractor. When it comes to outmaneuvering "Chuck-in-a-truck," the solution is straightforward — do not sacrifice professionalism, safety

ings that won't collapse. Explaining these issues to your customers will help set you apart from the competition. And when your crew shows up to build the deck, make sure they work safely. Safety glasses and ear plugs not only keep your people safe, they also project a professional image.

Quality costs money. Budget matters to every homeowner, no matter what is going on in the economy, and in a tough market, it can be tempting to lower your bid by cutting corners. Don't do it. Low-quality work will haunt you long after the low-dollar check for the job is spent.

That's not to say every sale has to be a fancy, high-dollar job. You can help homeowners assess critical factors other than cost, such as function

a stronger focus on aesthetics. By explaining to a prospect the benefits of the best available options in materials, fasteners, and the like, you create opportunities for upselling a homeowner, and you differentiate yourself from low-cost providers.

Membership in a professional trade association such as the North American Deck and Railing Association (NADRA) is one way that a deck builder can remain current with what's going on in the industry. NADRA has begun holding regional trade shows where NADRA members can see and touch new products and ask the suppliers questions, face to face. NADRA often offers a training class at these shows, too, that

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allows members to actually work with a product and become informed about potential applications. (*Professional Deck Builder* and NADRA also sponsor DeckExpo, an industry-wide show ([deckexpo.com](http://deckexpo.com)). This year it's in Indianapolis, October 27 through October 30.)

Even if you've reviewed a new product at a show, it's still essential to be a discerning contractor and try it out yourself. Incorporate new products into a test deck and see if they perform to your high standards when exposed to the elements.

#### Tap Into Trends

In any line of work, being aware of industry best practices is important.

It's in your interest to keep current on industry trends as well. Tapping into trends is not, however, the same thing as being trendy. You need to educate yourself on current trends and then point homeowners to the trends that make sense for them. Chuck-in-a-truck can focus on the "latest"; as a professional, you need to keep your eye on the "greatest" and present your potential clients with information on those trends that are likely to stick.

For instance, there is a big surge in the demand for green building, which you can meet with composite materials that are both eco-friendly and low maintenance. Additionally, manufacturers of pressure-treated wood are coming out with new formulations that are both more environmentally friendly and safer for the consumer.

Probably the biggest trend deck builders should keep in mind is that fewer homeowners are likely to upgrade by selling their current residence and buying a bigger and better home. Instead, with tighter budgets, people are looking to stay put and improve their current home and lifestyle, and build equity.

In closing, even today's turbulent marketplace offers opportunities, but you have to be savvy to find them. Plus, you need to position yourself to take advantage of the additional opportunities that will arise when the economy improves. This means even though your instinct in a tough economy may be to cut marketing budgets, it's critical to keep your eye on the prize and continue to do good, quality work — and tell people about it. It will pay dividends down the road. ♦

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