

Putting Social Media to Work

by Joe Stoddard

Everyone from your dentist to the TV weather forecaster is tweeting, blogging, and inviting you to “friend” him or her on Facebook. Worse, armies of “social media marketing experts” have popped up like toadstools, claiming that if you’re not spending some time every day on social networks, your business will soon be toast. But how can anyone be so sure about something that didn’t even exist a couple of years ago? Do you really need a “blog” for every house you start or a “Twitter feed” telling your prospects what you had for lunch? You just got your Web site up and running last year — isn’t that good enough?

The short answer is that social media presents a real opportunity to market your business like never before — but it can become a complete distraction if you’re not careful. The trick is to focus on the services that will get you the most visibility for the least amount of effort.

What Makes It “Social”?

“Social media” is any collaborative publishing platform on the Internet that is designed to develop a “community” of users and can be easily shared with others. Your existing marketing Web site probably isn’t social — yet — because only you can publish information on it. But add a photo gallery with a comments section where anyone can add his or her two cents and voila! — social media. The fact that your prospects or clients can “spread the word” by reposting your article or sharing a photo or video is what makes social media so powerful.

Of course, that knife cuts both ways. Someone who is unhappy with you or your work can damage your reputation just as easily as your happy clients can help you sell more jobs. That may make some builders gun-shy about social networking — but remember: An unhappy camper doesn’t need your Facebook page to complain about your work. These days, that conversation will go on with or without you. You’re always better off as a participant, armed with your own fans and followers.

The Players

There are hundreds of social-media sites on the Internet, but only a few would be of interest to a contractor.

General-purpose “community” services. Remember America Online and CompuServe before the World Wide Web? Facebook (facebook.com) and MySpace (myspace.com) are the modern-day replacements, offering subscribers a convenient range of free services like messaging, contacts, photo sharing, and games all under one roof. With 450,000,000 users globally and growing, Facebook has become the 800-pound online gorilla; only Google gets more overall Web traffic. And MySpace — though nowhere near as popular as it once was — has found a comfortable niche in the entertainment industry.

Media sharing sites. Flickr (flickr.com) and YouTube (youtube.com) are the best examples of media sharing sites. They allow users to upload and share photos (Flickr) and videos (YouTube) without having to maintain their own servers.

Micro-blogging. Twitter (twitter.com) is a “short message service” that lets users post 140-character “tweets” about whatever is on their minds. You can sign up to “follow” other users whose tweets interest you, and accumulate followers for yourself if your “Twitter feed” proves interesting to others.

Business-to-business sites. LinkedIn (linkedin.com) is the best example of a B-to-B site focused on helping people find work opportunities by networking with their peers. It’s also a good way to keep tabs on what your competition may be up to.

Reputation-based referral sites. Angie’s List (angieslist.com) and ServiceMagic (servicemagic.com) are used by homeowners to find competent contractors to work for them, and by contractors to find qualified leads.

Blogs. A contraction of “Web log,” the word “blog” simply refers to a two-way Web site. You publish articles, photos, and videos about whatever is on your mind, and your readers add comments and content of their own in response. Most blogs have a theme; yours could be about building houses or “the life of a remodeler.” WordPress (wordpress.org) and Blogger (blogger.com) are the two most commonly used blog platforms, and both are free. Whereas Facebook and MySpace and many other services control content to some degree, WordPress and

Blogger give you complete control over what's on your blog.

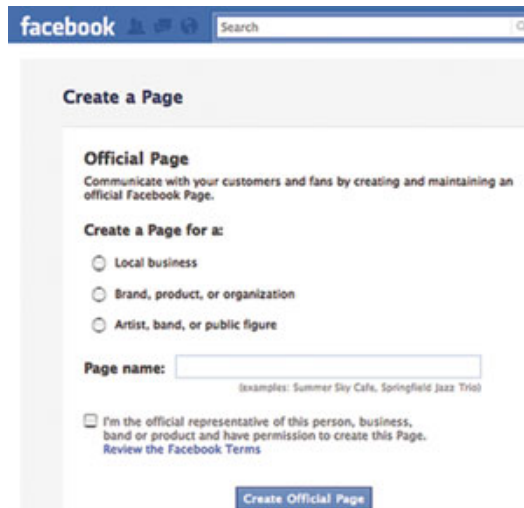
Start With Facebook

Larger builders and remodelers have the resources to conduct integrated social media campaigns that combine Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other social media to drive traffic to their Web site and — ultimately — to real-world open houses, or into their sales-management system.

While that approach can be very successful, it takes money, time, and talent. Someone — either in-house staff or a consultant — has to create high-quality content for each site, target specific demographic groups, and then monitor the results from each service, tweaking as necessary. In researching this column, I ran some numbers on setting up a Twitter-Facebook-blog-Web-site campaign, and what I came up with suggests that you'd have to spend almost 80 hours a month to gain a handful of sales a year. That's simply not practical for most small operations.

Luckily, you can get many of the same benefits with a fraction of the effort by using just Facebook, which is very small-business-friendly. It has a ton of built-in features you can use to establish your brand and, at the same time, protect yourself from reputation assassins. Facebook is convenient to use and “sticky,” which means it allows users to do everything they need to — such as sending and receiving e-mail — without leaving the site.

It's estimated that half of all the people online in the U.S. are using Facebook, and that half of those are on the site on any given day. Once there, users tend to stay for almost an hour on average (10 to 15 minutes is considered good for the typical Web site). The fastest growing segment of users is women aged 45 to 54 — a demographic group that often makes key decisions in building and remodeling projects. Facebook gets more than 50 percent of



Facebook is small-business-friendly, but don't try to use your personal profile for business. Instead, set up an “Official Page” for your business using the “Create a Page” dialog. You reach it from the “Ads and Pages” link on the left side of your Facebook personal profile page.

all social media traffic. YouTube is next with 14+ percent. By comparison, Twitter receives barely 1 percent.

Flexibility. You can set up as many Facebook business pages as you want: one for your company and a separate one for each of your projects. Instead of collecting “friends,” which is how a personal Facebook profile works, business pages get “fans.” You can't invite them directly — as you can friends — but fans will find you in a variety of ways, including through recommendations from other fans they know, searches, and “nudges” from your personal “wall.” To become fans, viewers click the “like this” button on your page. While the general public can see your page or become a fan, you have control over who can make comments or upload photos and videos.

Most important, Facebook — though global in reach — is absolutely local in usage and scope. It's not uncommon to find “everyone in town” using it — people building community groups and other local-interest features that are an extension of their real-world activities, where they post meeting notices and report on whatever is going on. That's perfect for builders and remodelers who need to attract prospects in a particular age group and in a particular market area.

Personal profile first. To set up a Facebook business page, you first need a personal account established in your name. That account will then become the administrator account for other business pages you build. Many people don't realize this and try to create their business page by building it on a personal profile, using, for instance, the name “John's Carpentry” instead of “John Doe.” If you make that error, it won't take long for you to realize that something isn't right — plus, it's a violation of Facebook's terms of service. Every personal profile has to be an actual person; it can't be a business name or a fictitious character.

Once your personal profile is set up, you can create an “Official Page” for a “Local business,” “Brand, product, or organization,” or “Artist, band, or public figure” (see graphic, previous page). There's actually very little difference in the setups. Default features may vary, but you can change them later. Check the box indicating that you're the official representative, give your page a name, click “Create Official Page,” and your official page is created.

Next, you have to “edit” the page. This is where you'll add or subtract features and configure who can add things to it. The process is pretty much self-explanatory.

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There are half-a-dozen content categories (Discussion Boards, Events, Links, Photos, Notes, and Videos); feedback features like Insight and Review; and dozens of third-party applications, like data feeds from other social media applications, calendar displays, and more.

Facebook business pages also include a development environment called “Static FBML” (Facebook markup language), which you can use to customize your pages even more.

Web Videos

A picture is worth a thousand words, and a five-minute video of your actual customer giving you a glowing review — or of your lead carpenter showing how you ensure watertight window installations — is worth a thousand still photos. In a Web video, you can distribute information in a few minutes that would otherwise take hours of writing and Web-site-building to convey. Nobody expects Web videos to be slick productions; for the most part, you can get away with point-and-shoot.

While Facebook has its own way to embed videos on a business page, you don’t have to use it. You can embed videos from other sites like YouTube, which in my opinion is the best way to go. You’ll have to set up and maintain another site, but the results are worth the effort. YouTube is by far the most popular video-sharing site, and its search engine is used almost as much as Google’s. For that reason alone, it’s to your advantage to store your videos there. YouTube videos wind up being indexed by Google in the same way as other Web pages (Google owns YouTube), so you get that much more search-engine exposure. YouTube also lets you create your own “channel” that can be customized to maintain your branding and colors.

YouTube does have a few limitations — for example, your videos are limited to 10 minutes in length. That has proven to be



Dayton, Ohio, custom builder Dan DeVol used his Facebook business page to promote a “muddy boots” open house — a tour of a partially completed custom spec.

adequate for just about everybody I know, but if you needed to create longer videos, you could use one of the more specialized sites, like Viddler (viddler.com).

How About Blogs or Twitter?

Gary Katz, who’s a regular presenter at *JLC* Live, publishes a great blog called “This is Carpentry” (thisiscarpentry.com). In fact, it’s really more than just a blog — it’s a true digital magazine, or “e-zine,” with a wealth of guest content, interesting photos, and interactive Web videos featuring nationally recognized experts. A high-quality Web publication like that can be very successful in positioning someone as a “thought leader”; some e-zines and blogs have readerships that rival those of national publications and even broadcast media.

But achieving success with a blog depends on establishing, growing, and re-

taining a steady readership. And if you’re using your blog to supply your sales pipeline, you’ll want those readers to be people who are qualified (ready, willing, and able) to purchase something from you, or who are willing to refer someone else who is. It’s also helpful to attract the attention of even bigger, better blog authors; they may be willing to republish your material for still larger audiences.

Even though you’re not charging anything for your blog’s content, it’s still costing your readers a precious commodity to read it — their time. It’s not hard to get someone to check out your blog once or twice, but nobody’s going to keep coming back (or refer others to it) unless what they find there adds value to their lives. You need to give them more than they’re “spending” to read it, like important construction information they didn’t already

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have or even just a good laugh once or twice a week. And once you start, you're committed. You can't publish your blog a few times and then stop for a while; your readership will dry up quicker than a mud puddle in July. So here's my bottom line on blogs (and Twitter): If you want to publish a blog for your own enjoyment, that's great. Just don't expect very much from it in terms of building a sales pipeline.

Some builders use blogs as a project-specific Web site — a semiprivate collaboration site with pictures, discussions, links to manufacturers for their selections, and so forth. Likewise, Twitter can be used to send a short text message to a group of your subcontractors or to send notice about an upcoming parade of homes. Those are worthy purposes, but they're very different from trying to use a blog or Twitter to drive sales. For most small-volume builders, I think a “marketing blog” or daily Twitter feed is a futile effort — more trouble than it's worth.

Be on Your Best Behavior

Whether it's a blog, Twitter, Facebook, or something else, once you bring your business into the picture, you'll need to be on your best behavior 24-7-365 — and that goes for your personal accounts as well as your business pages, since they're all connected. A Facebook page “storefront” that's screaming for maintenance (weeding out posts and photos uploaded by others) will leave the same bad first impression as a real storefront with dirty windows and peeling paint. And the same off-color post on your Facebook “wall” that your golf buddies thought was hilarious could trigger a firestorm of negative criticism on your business page.

Finally, if Angie's List or any other

The image shows a screenshot of the Facebook page for 'Daniel DeVol Custom Builder'. The page layout includes a cover photo, a profile picture, and a bio. Below the bio, there are sections for 'Photos', 'Video', and 'Links'. The 'Photos' section shows a photo of a house. The 'Video' section shows a video player. The 'Links' section shows a link to the builder's website. The 'Comments' section shows several comments from users, including one from 'Teresa DeJong' and another from 'Daniel DeVol Custom Builder'. Three red arrows point to specific features: one points to the 'Links' section with the annotation 'Links to main builder Web site, other Facebook pages, and manufacturer Web sites'; another points to a photo of a house with the annotation 'Photos and videos of projects and training, plus other multimedia'; and a third points to a comment from 'Teresa DeJong' with the annotation 'Ongoing discussion with prospects and clients reinforces buyer confidence'.

Facebook “Official” business pages are highly customizable. The stock features shown here include links, photos, and videos, as well as discussions and surveys. More advanced users can take advantage of the “Static FBML” application to create completely customized content.

contractor-referral sites are active in your area, join them and participate — whether or not you expect to do business with them. This is important even if you're only going to keep an eye on what's being said about your business. Your best bet is to be proactive and to build a good fan following on both Facebook and the referral sites. You can use your Facebook “wall” along with the discussion and review features of both Facebook and the reputation sites to counteract the reputation assassin who's bound to pop up from time to time.

Joe Stoddard is a contributing editor at JLC and moderator of the business technology forum at jlconline.com.