

Getting Started With Social Media

Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Houzz: What's the difference?

“Friend me and I’ll tag you in this picture so you can tweet and share it on your page.” This is the language of social media — Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Houzz, and others. In essence, social media is a free online way to reach a virtually unlimited number of people in an informal, fun setting. You probably know you ought to be using it for marketing, but maybe you aren’t sure why or how.

Still, I hear you grumbling about it. You are a deck builder, not a social butterfly. You don’t have time for that silliness. You barely have time to take care of the piles of paperwork you need to tackle in your office. This is what I hear from my father, Ed Pacylowski, the owner of ProBuilt Construction, where I am, among other things, marketing director. While my father sees the value in marketing and branding his business through print and our website, when it comes to social media, he shakes his head and says, “Why would people care about what you did today? What happened to privacy?” Or, “Tweeting is for birds.”

In all seriousness, if you don’t use some form of social media to promote your business, you are like Michael Phelps swimming in a bathtub — a champion making a lot of splash in a tiny space, when you could be in an Olympic-size pool making waves that reach thousands.

You’ve Got to Sell Decks to Build Decks

A lot of deck builders don’t think much about marketing. They chose this profession because they like building their own designs, or they like to be their own boss, or, in the words of Ray Steward of RWS Decks, “I can work without a shirt on, get a tan, crank the heavy metal, and get paid for it!” They have a



Here's a great deck my company built with a custom railing and pergola. Please add it to your own gallery.



I design and build decks



My skills include deck building



Deck party tonight!
Invitation to my deck building circle buddies to hang-out with me via a streaming happy hour, BYOB: 6 PM



passion to use their knowledge and skills to build beautiful spaces for others, but not necessarily to sell them.

The challenge to selling decks is that people can survive without them in their lives. Purchasing a deck is not a necessity, so the investment homeowners make in an outdoor space is primarily emotionally driven. They want a place to share with and show off to others, and to enjoy with their families. The key to marketing decks, then, is to reach that emotional side of the brain, and one fairly easy and inexpensive way to do it is with social media.

If you've had any success as a deck builder, you have likely developed a following and friendships with lifelong customers. This is the basis of social media — developing and maintaining friendships in an informal online setting. Your first social-media friendships will be your existing customers, professional colleagues, neighbors, friends, and family. You can get started with any social media platform simply by going to its website. Signing up is easy, and once you have an account, you can use your email address book as a starting point for finding others who use that site. The site will walk you through the process.

It's a lot like word-of-mouth advertising. If you're active on social media — chatting with people and posting photos of your work — your existing friendships will soon extend to your friend's friends, colleagues, neighbors, and family. It works like this. When you post something, your followers can see it and comment. Their followers can see your mutual followers' comments on your posts. If these second-tier contacts like what they see, they might begin to follow you as well. This can build the name recognition of your business exponentially. The goal is to make the first thought that pops into the head of a neighbor of a friend of a colleague of a customer who is thinking about building a deck, "I'm calling the company that builds those beautiful decks I saw on Facebook (or Pinterest, or Twitter, or whatever social media)."

Which Social Media Platform to Use?

I'm aware of nine major social media platforms. You can utilize all of them or some of them. The more you use, the greater your exposure. But you'll also spend a commensurate amount

What Social Sites Do



Facebook is a 24/7 versatile online communication site. You can post pictures, comment on contests, post where you are working, set up events and invite people, and follow others.



Foursquare is a site where you check in to let others know where you are located. It's full of reviews of local businesses.



Google+ is a rival of Facebook. Examples of how G+ differs are its "hangouts" (video chat) and "sparks" (list of interesting topics to share with others).



Houzz is a website where architects, interior designers, landscape designers, and home-improvement contractors can post professional, high-resolution, and mostly staged photos of their projects, providing a searchable library of images.



Instagram is a photo-sharing site that allows you to add special effects to photos. Instagram is now owned by Facebook. The app can be downloaded free at the iTunes App Store and Google Play.



LinkedIn is an online resume and professional networking site, with user-created special-interest discussion boards.



Pinterest is a photo-sharing site focused on popular hobbies, interests, places, and events. Pinterest's mission is to "connect everyone in the world through the various 'things' they find interesting."



Twitter is a place to post (tweet) and follow real-time news in 140 characters or less. The symbol # (hash tag) before a word makes it searchable. You can set up a Twitter account for free.



YouTube is a site where you can set up a channel and upload videos. Whether informational, musical, or comedic, your video channel is searchable by a keyword in the title.

of time on each one. All the platforms are free. They all allow you to buy advertising, too, but start small, get to know each one, and find what platform is the best fit for you and your company before you start paying for ads.

Still feeling overwhelmed? Once you get started, it's not that hard. When the economy was booming several years ago, my father's company was able to hire people to run the marketing program. However, when the economy took a turn for the worse, we had to downsize. For me, that meant taking over sales and marketing, as well as meeting with homeowners daily, working on designs, writing proposals, and following up with the customers throughout the duration of each project. I had a lot to do and a shoestring budget. Social media was a great way to leverage what marketing dollars we had.

I registered ProBuilt for a Google Places page, as well as for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Houzz, and Pinterest accounts. Then I started posting pictures and information. If I could spend all of my work hours on marketing and social media, I would use all of the platforms, all of the time, but I simply do not have that luxury. So, I do what I can when I can to keep our name visible on the Web.

The main social media I use are Facebook and Pinterest. I am not a huge fan of Twitter because I like to have conversations that aren't limited to 140 characters, as Twitter is. I do upload pictures to our Houzz account, which is sort of a portfolio, but I feel that requires professional photography. That not only costs big money, but you have to invest in staging an area with decorative items to make the photos appealing.

Facebook and Pinterest are what I like personally, so I feel comfortable using them professionally. Both are simple to use and only require time and a camera. In about two minutes, I can snap a picture with my iPhone and use a phone app to upload the images directly to my Facebook (facebook.com/help/463079013702512/) or Pinterest (pinterest.com/about/apps/) page. These platforms are interactive and visual.

For example, on Facebook, I recently posted some 3D CAD renderings of a deck and patio project and asked our followers to vote on their favorite design. I obtained permission from the homeowner prior to posting, and she "liked" ProBuilt's page so she could participate in the survey. I also "tagged" her in the photos so she could share them with her friends and family to have them vote on the design they liked best for her home. Afterward, the homeowner said the Facebook post helped her because people brought up ideas that she and her husband had not considered.

Pinterest is a photo-sharing site. One cool aspect of it is that your posts don't have to be restricted to your own work — you can use images you find on other Pinterest pages to create design boards of ideas and spaces. Potential customers can then go to your Pinterest page to get ideas for their

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deck. And when other Pinterest users “repin” your pictures, it helps your business branding.

Several platforms, but notably Pinterest, Facebook, and Twitter, have both personal and business profile pages. With Facebook, you need to have a personal profile page in order to start a business page. If you are just getting into social media, you should test the waters with a personal page to see what platform you find the easiest to use. You can add a business profile page later.

Get Social

To incorporate social media in your marketing plan, you have three options: Do it yourself, hire someone else to do it, or enlist someone you trust to help you do it for free or barter. Doing nothing is not really an option, as in today’s climate that may be the death of your business.

If you’re still not convinced you can get rolling with social media, elicit the help of others who already incorporate social

media in their life: your spouse, your teenage children, or someone in your church or community. Ask a student to be an intern. Think broadly, and make it an enjoyable, part-time activity that you either pay for or barter services for. You may be surprised at how many people already use social media and would love to help out. Where getting comfortable with social media might take you a couple of hours, social-media enthusiasts can take care of it in a matter of minutes. You simply provide them with content (digital photos, video) that represents your brand and image.

How do you incorporate social media into your everyday business? This is the easy part. You talk about it when you meet with potential customers: “Check us out on Facebook,” or “We’ve got some great photos up on Pinterest.” Include links to your social-media pages in your email signature. Add them to your business cards, your trucks, yard signs, door hangers, and flyers.

Once you have pages, the challenge is keeping your followers engaged. You should post frequently, but you’ll lose followers if you bombard them with a million status updates every day or use the platform as a sales pitch. Social media is an informal place to stay in contact with people in your circle of colleagues, friends, and family. Instead of posting comments like, “I am building a deck in Columbia, Md., today,” ask a question that is not necessarily related to deck building, but that encourages interaction. For example, “My next project is located in Howard County, Md., next to one of the world’s best outdoor amphitheaters, where Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and the Grateful Dead have played. Where am I?”

Social media is about interacting with others in a manner that is easy-going, fun, and sometimes educational. Holding contests for items is a great way to keep your followers interested and engaged. It doesn’t have to be expensive—I’ve seen people answer a question to win a free promotional cloth grocery bag.

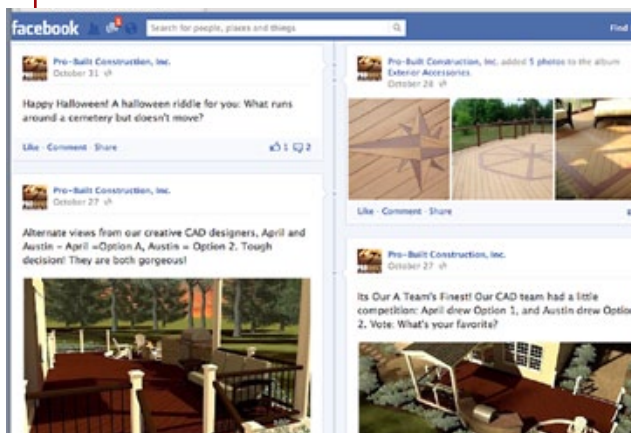
The take-home message here is that social media is as important as the hammer in your tool belt or the business card in your wallet. It is a tool that enhances your business brand and name recognition, for free. It is a way for you to communicate with a group of people that share the same interests as you and respect you as a professional. It isn’t a fad and it isn’t going away. Embrace the opportunity to incorporate it into your business model and make it work for you.

If you agree, send me a #happytweet and become my friend on Facebook. If not, share your #grumble with me and I promise I will still smile because you used social media to reach out to me! ❖

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Include your website address on your other advertising and marketing platforms.



Social media is a great way to get other people talking about your company.