

# PUTTING THE BEST FACE FORWARD

The importance and value of one-to-one marketing in a digital age.

By Spencer Fleury

These days, every self-styled marketing guru with a business card is pushing Twitter and Facebook as a one-size-fits-all, can't-live-without-it marketing tool. Yes, social media has its place in the marketing toolbox for just about any business, but most contractors would probably be better served by getting back to basics before getting online.

What does that mean? For most contractors, there are more effective ways of making connections than using social media, and they often involve a lot of direct interaction with other contractors and potential clients. Especially if new to a particular market, don't waste time on the computer. To get one's name out there, start by spending time making quality, face-to-face connections.

"For most successful contractors, there will come a time when they should strongly consider working with an outside marketing company," says Matthew Anderson, president of Sarasota, Florida-based Milestone Marketing Associates, Inc. "But even if you're not quite ready to take that step, there are a number of low- and no-cost marketing techniques you can use to promote your business."

"The most powerful, most meaningful, and longest-lasting business relationships are built face-to-face," Anderson adds. "Businesses that understand this simple truth and know how to follow up on it have a very real advantage over their competitors."

## TELL FRIENDS

Most people will at least pay lip service to the importance of word-of-mouth advertising. But as it turns out, not everyone knows how to make it work for them. Doing quality work and

waiting for word to spread isn't good enough, and any contractor who stops there may not last long enough to reap the marketing benefits of a string of jobs well done.

"You can't just sit back and expect satisfied customers to tell their friends," admonishes Anderson. "Sure, some of them will,

but most won't—unless you specifically ask them to tell their friends."

Is that all it takes? Often it is, Anderson says. "People really like to be asked. And once a customer recommends you for the first time, they'll usually do it again. But you have to take that first step and actually ask for it."

But be careful—don't assume customers will be reluctant to criticize if the work is slipshod, late, or over budget. They won't be. Customers who feel burned will often go out of their way to drag a company's name through the dirt for the benefit of everyone they know. And that kind of toxic word-of-mouth can sink a company's reputation in no time flat, even with a truckload of positive referrals on their side.

## IT'S ALL IN WHO YOU KNOW

"People often underestimate the benefits of being a trusted member of a professional community," Anderson says. "Knowing the right people in your area can open a lot of

doors—you might hear of upcoming bids that you didn't know about, you might find yourself being recommended for more subcontracting opportunities, or you might hear that a job you were planning to bid isn't as attractive an opportunity as you initially thought it was."

But who, exactly, are the "right people?" That's hard to say—the right person in one situation might be hopelessly out of the



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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loop in another. So, the best bet is to get out to local business networking events and meet everyone possible. And don't just limit connections to other contractors—one never knows where that next lead will come from.

### GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

It takes a lot of time and effort to build legitimacy in the business world. This is especially true for contractors, since unscrupulous and unskilled imposters can make it hard for customers to sort out the dedicated, skilled professionals from the poseurs. Customers need as much information as they can get in order to figure out who is worth hiring and who's not.

One easy way that contractors can help their businesses achieve legitimacy in the eyes of prospects is by joining professional associations for contractors and builders.

"Association membership conveys legitimacy," stresses Anderson. "It tells people that you have acquired a certain skill level and that you have a history of professionalism in your business dealings. If you're not a member, prospects will wonder why not."

Joining professional associations also helps with networking. "It's one of the most effective methods there is for ramping up your professional networking efforts," Anderson adds.

No matter a contractor's location or specialty, there is almost certainly a professional association to join in the local area.

### SHOW AND TELL FOR GROWNUPS

For a contractor, a trade show can feel like a giant toy store. But as much fun as they are, trade shows also represent a golden opportunity to do some serious marketing.

"Trade shows have been described as the malls of the business world, but I'd say that understates their importance and benefits," Anderson says. "At a trade show, you know going in that everyone you'll meet will be there because they share a common interest: your industry. You'll have an unmatched opportunity to meet existing customers and reach out to new ones you might never have found if they hadn't walked right past your booth."

Many businesses see trade shows as excellent lead generation opportunities and set up booths to display their products and literature, while others prefer a less formal approach and attend simply to socialize with the people they need to socialize with, like clients, prospects, and competitors. Either way, trade shows are an excellent face-to-face marketing opportunity and should not be overlooked.

"Whether you're actually exhibiting or just there to look around, you should make it a goal to attend at least one or two trade shows per year," adds Anderson.

### FAIL TO PLAN, PLANNING TO FAIL

As effective as these tools can be in kick-starting a contractor's marketing efforts, they're not foolproof. Anderson stresses that a well-thought-out marketing plan is just as important for face-to-face marketing as it is for a million-dollar advertising campaign.

"You have to know what your goals are, understand how you can reach them, and commit to putting the time in," he says. "You can't just sign up for the local builders association or go to a trade show and consider it done, like you were checking something off a list. You have to work hard at your marketing, no matter how much or how little you're spending on it." ■

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