BY PERRYN OLSON

GOING DIGITAL:
The Right Tools for Your Company

Current technology has vastly improved how many contractors do business.

The cost and inefficiencies of having a team member drive across town to attend a meeting, get files, or access the Internet is eliminated, not to mention the improved accuracy of a digital worksite (see Recent Tech Trends sidebar within the article).

Technology advancements have also paved the way for even more opportunities to recruit top employees, generate business, and save money by making the most of your company's website and social media outlets.

THE BASICS FOR YOUR COMPANY'S WEBSITE

What would a prospective customer and/or potential employee see if they went to your company's website right now? If they looked through nine of your competitors' websites, would yours stand out? What would they see if they used their smartphone to access your website?

Does your company have a website because it *has* to? Is your site a burden because of its expense and constant need to be updated? Read on to see how to make your website work for your company.

Stand Out from the Crowd

The most important thing to remember when planning your website is that it has to look professional. While you don't need a flashy website that revolutionizes web design, you *do* need one that encourages prospective clients, project partners, or employees searching for your company online to spend some time learning more about your company.

Your website should reflect the rest of your brand's look and feel. For example, if I met you at a CFMA function and got your business card, your website should have the same look. Similarly, when you submit a proposal, it should look like all

of your other marketing materials. Otherwise, your business card, website, proposal, and other branded items will make your company look disjointed. You already have enough competitors without making your own company one, too!

It's also important to remember that your website does not operate in a vacuum, and many of your prospective customers, project partners, and employees are actively looking for you on the web. They probably search 5-8 (and sometimes up to 20) websites when performing their research.

So, you need to differentiate your company from its competitors, or else it will blend in with all the rest. A prospect will never know you have a great company and dynamic team if you have the same tired message as the rest of your competitors – "on time and on budget." If your company wasn't on time and on budget, then it wouldn't be in business.

A few major considerations when planning your website include promoting your company's culture, keeping your site up-to-date, and having a mobile strategy.

Promote Your Company's Culture

Whether your company is straight-laced or freewheeling, its website should match its culture and attitude to attract the right employees and clients. With a wrong or misleading impression, relationships with potential clients and project partners may be strained, and you'll miss out on hiring the right employees. Showcasing your brand's personality while maintaining professionalism helps your company stand out, be memorable, and attract clients on an emotional level.

Also, consider what your current and prospective clients care about, and be careful when using industry jargon – particularly acronyms. Relating to clients is key, and some might not be as familiar with the industry. If you have a niche or are in a vertical market, promote that because it is a powerful advantage. For example, if your company doesn't have a learning curve in a specialized area that other companies might, promote your team's efficiency and ability to deliver better results.

Keep Content Current

Keeping your website current does not mean redesigning it every year, but you do need to keep the content current. You don't want a prospect to see that your news section is two years old and your latest project was completed five years ago.

To keep your website current, use a Content Management System (CMS) to enable your team to easily add new projects and news, change text, and take full ownership of the

website. Since it is one of your company's most visible marketing tools, take pride in it.

Be Mobile Friendly

We live in a mobile world, and your website should function accordingly. A mobile-friendly website can be viewed and read without needing to pinch and pull the screen to fit, and may resemble a mobile app with larger buttons made for a finger to tap vs. a mouse to click.

To be mobile-friendly, you could create a separate mobile website, but then you would have two websites to maintain. A better solution is to add a mobile page with your company's contact and key information branded to look like the rest of your website. Include a link to the full website in case the visitor wants to know more.

The best solution is to use a newer technique called responsive web design, where your website responds to any screen size (such as a desktop, laptop, tablet, or smartphone). The beauty behind responsive design is that you use one system so there is less to maintain. Unlike a separate mobile website, which generally has set sizes, a responsive site works great with newer sizes such as the iPhone 5 or iPad mini.

PUT YOUR WEBSITE TO WORK

Your website is a tool that should be used to reduce redundant manual work and as a silo of information.

Attract Potential Subcontractors & Employees

In many cases, you're only as good as your subcontractors and employees. Don't you want the best on your team?

Much like online job postings and applications, designate a section of your website specifically for subcontractors to register with your company. Also, consider having an online plan room where registered subcontractors can download plans and specs without having to contact your company. Secure this section to protect your customers as well as your company's intellectual property. In your online plan room, designate a file storage area to house project and prospective customer files since many are too large to e-mail. This eliminates printing and delivery costs and provides control over who receives what information. You can develop proprietary tools or use off-the-shelf software.

If you want to attract anyone under 30, especially those graduating in construction management, then you must have a solid web presence. If you don't, then you may as well not

exist. The more impressive your website is, the more likely that potential employees will be moved to apply to your company. Job postings and applications are easy to convert online and have an instant return. This is another feature that can be a web form that feeds into a database of potential employees for easy searching and sorting. Posting your job openings is a convenient and highly effective way to attract talent.

Communicate Before, During & After a Disaster

Every contractor should have a disaster plan in place, and your website is a great hub for disaster communication. Your website can be employed as a rallying point for your team,

subcontractors, and clients to check in so you know everyone's status and availability. This also gives you a forum to announce return instructions and company news.

Employee Section

Another great way to make your website work for your company is to include an employee section. Here, you can house links to your benefit providers (such as health insurance and retirement plans), emergency contact information, and day-to-day internal documents like vacation request forms. You can even take the internal forms a step further and create a web form that automatically feeds into a database; this way, HR merely has to click a checkbox to approve requests, instead of manually tracking the requests and calculating schedules via Excel. This also helps prevent errors caused by illegible handwriting and duplicate data entry. Just ask your HR department for its most frequent requests and incorporate appropriate solutions into your website.

You can also move your safety and company manuals online instead of printing them to save time and money (and improve your carbon footprint). Take this a step further and create a mobile app for your manuals and documents, allowing you to easily publish updates each time the app is opened. Some apps even allow you to send cell phone notifications through the app, similar to a text message.

You can secure this employee section with a company-wide password, or create an employee database that includes individual usernames and passwords for additional security. It's a good idea to have a mix of some information being open to the public and some behind a secure login.

Social Media Benefits

Many contractors have disregarded social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. However, those not utilizing social media are missing a very valuable and cost-efficient way to connect with their brand audience on an emotional level. Here are a few reasons your company should use social media:
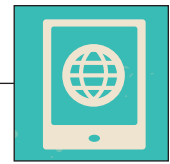
Connect to the Public

Use social media to inform the public about your company's progress on large projects. Local or national media may even pick up the story, resulting in free marketing. Also, informing the public about road closures shows that your company cares and helps decrease traffic issues. For example, I follow the Facebook page for a seven-year expansion of a bridge near my house because there are regular posts about blocked or restricted traffic, which helps me plan my

day. This is much more proactive and efficient than reading the road construction sign a few hundred yards before the bridge telling me it's currently closed.

Develop Business

One of the more obvious reasons to take part in social media is for business development. You can create stronger relationships with current clients and prospective customers, even ones you do not know about yet. A prospective customer may research you online and make a decision on whom to short-list months before anyone gets word about the project. Business developers can get loads of information using social media; they can learn about new projects from architects and project owners, and build stronger relationships by connecting with key decision makers.

Keep Your Employees Informed

Internally, you can connect your company with its project updates, pictures, promotions, and general company news, much like a newsletter; this is especially helpful for larger, multi-location companies. One big difference is in relation to time; social media is as real-time as you want it to be vs. a printed newsletter that takes weeks to design, print, and mail. Construction companies can use Facebook or LinkedIn groups to form a private network where they can control membership and content. You can include family members on a Facebook group to show off what you do and encourage future generations to join your company's ranks.

Recruit Employees

As I previously mentioned, if you're trying to recruit employees under the age of 30, then you must have an online presence. A social media presence should be part of your recruiting strategy because it allows you to project your company culture and personality, show that you're innovative, and demonstrate that you care about the younger generations. If you want to aggressively recruit 18- to 25-year-olds, I'd highly recommend Facebook advertising, where you can pinpoint certain demographics like college-educated or an interest in construction.

Train Employees

You can save money through social media by posting training classes on YouTube. This way, you can ensure the training covers the required materials, avoid paying a trainer every time someone needs to be trained, and save on employee downtime. Many construction crews cannot do part of their work in the rain, so save these videos for a rainy day instead of scheduling a training on a potentially beautiful work day. Consider a hybrid of videos and hands-on instruction with

your trainers to provide the best learning experience for your teams. You can restrict who can see these videos if necessary, and tracking them can show HR who is preparing for the next steps in their career.

Obtain Feedback

At the very least, being active on social media gives you an avenue to hear what is being said about your company. You can't resolve an issue if you don't know it exists.

Create a Social Media Plan

With the plethora of social media outlets, it's easy to become overwhelmed. But remember, you don't need to be on a particular media simply because other companies are. For example, my company heavily utilizes social media, but we do not currently have a presence on Facebook.

So, you need to create a plan for using social media and assign spokespeople to execute that plan. Start with your goals and target audience. For example, my company does construction marketing and design, so we post about construction, marketing, websites, and social media – all things that affect our clients and prospects. The time we've dedicated to creating and carrying out our social media plan has paid off in the form of new business.

Since you're empowering your employees to represent your brand, you should provide some guidelines. Create a social media policy to help them understand what they can and can't do.

Don't try to tackle all social media channels at once; select the ones that fit your company's needs. Start with one or two, get to know and understand the medium well, and then try out another one. (For more information, check out "Social Media: Don't Miss the Opportunities" by Carol E. Hagen in the November/December 2011 issue.)

While my company is not on Facebook, we are very active on Twitter and LinkedIn. About a year ago, we started experimenting with Pinterest, but have yet to dedicate significant time or resources to achieve substantial results.

The only thing worse than not utilizing social media is doing it inconsistently (e.g., a Twitter account that hasn't been active for years or a blog that still says "Welcome World" as its first and only post). In addition to blogging 2-3 times a month (to increase your website's ranking on search engines and give readers a reason to visit your website again), I suggest these frequencies:

- LinkedIn – 1-2 times a week
- Facebook – 3-10 times a week

- Twitter – 5-8 times a day

- YouTube – 1-2 times a month

- Google+ – 3-8 times a week

- Pinterest – 1-2 times a week

After you've established the right outlets and a schedule, become active in industry group discussions, and more importantly, discussions within your clients' groups.

Remember that social media is about creating and building relationships, not "show-and-sell." Engage your network throughout the year instead of only connecting with them at conferences and trade shows. Just the other day, someone called me for a recommendation for a specialty contractor in my area, and last week I referred a client to a Twitter friend in another state. The key to social media is participation.

CONCLUSION

Being digital is about ROI and continuing to move your company toward growth and success. You need to make specific decisions and plans about when to use technology. Project your company's differentiation, culture, and personality on all of your marketing materials, particularly your website, and consider giving social media a try. ∎

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Perryn is also past president of Executive Connections, a business networking group. He was selected as one of *Gambit's* 40 Under 40 in 2010 and one of *New Orleans City Business'* One to Watch in Construction.

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