



Lumber dealers cautious about social media

SOME industries are filled with “early adopters”—companies and individuals obsessed with embracing the latest technology. The lumber industry is not among them.

So it has been no surprise that as the “social networking” craze snowballs into Twitter hysteria, the average LBM company has turned a deaf ear. Indeed, in a *BPD* search among 50 randomly selected LBM dealers only seven (14%) had a Facebook presence. In a tough market, dealers figure they have better things to do than to troll for friends on the computer.

Yet there’s never been a better time for your company to get started in social media. It’s easy and inexpen-

sive to get started (depending how much time you devote to it). It can help promote your brand, drive more traffic to your website, and provide useful information for your customers. And, best of all, its core is the same as the lumber business’s—communicating with and strengthening bonds within a specifically defined community. It’s about relationships.

While you won’t find a large percentage of LBM companies using social networking sites, you will find a huge number of customers and prospects. According to *Corporate Logo Magazine*, more than 50% of Americans now have a Facebook page, and Facebook has more than 200 million active users—and its

greatest growth isn’t in penniless college kids, but in adults aged 35-49. LinkedIn is the second-largest social media platform with more than 39 million professionals. Twitter has more than 14 million unique visitors and receives over 2 million “tweets” per day. About 5,000 small businesses join Twitter every day.

“We dipped our toe into social media by signing onto Twitter for the very first time two months ago,” said Scott Thomas, director of marketing for distributor Parksite, Batavia, IL. “We were encouraged to find many like-minded businesses in our industry: builders, fabricators, lumberyards, architects and suppliers. We were intrigued and impressed with what

our business associates were tweeting about. Today's marketing is about being helpful, not intrusive, and putting constructive information in the places where people go to find it."

Hibbert Lumber, Davis, Ca., started tweeting in July to alert its customers, every one to two weeks, with details of its latest sale. During August, Niece Lumber, Lambertville, N.J., was able to compile 57 followers to its Twitter feed through succinct, almost-daily comments and links to industry-related articles.

The new technologies are an easy entry point for updating a stodgy image. K&K True Value Hardware, Bettendorf, Ia., has been using Facebook since March to target "a younger customer through cheap advertising," said store manager Casey Keller. "I add new videos, photos, and try new things that I hear about, such as linking our page to community pages and vendors. Our marketing director adds new flyers and or coupons to the site. I have a few employees who have posted random things."

Cape May Lumber Co., W. Cape May, N.J., started on Facebook in

August, hoping to channel visitors to its website. "We are one of the few local lumberyards to have a website, and have visitors every day," said Tony Simon, MIS/IT manager. "We like the attraction of our website for new and existing customers. On occasion, we will get a call from someone saying, 'I didn't know you had this...,' and more often it will be a longtime customer."

Yet customers must visit a company's website to view ad messages posted there. Posts on Facebook and Twitter go directly to your intended audience, with the possibility of popping up on their friends' sites, and their friends' friends' sites, and so on. It's a ripple effect.

Celina Lumber, Celina, Tn., began on Facebook and MySpace in May. According to sales rep Leigh Shaull, "Our goal is to reach a larger audience than we could reach under normal circumstances, and the fact that the service is free helps tremendously. We are located in a small county, but have many tourists because of our lake. These people are usually unfamiliar with the county, but familiar with the Internet. Our hope is that

they will find our pages based on many keywords we have used in our descriptions."

Shaull added, "Our other goal is to advertise to our friends about upcoming sales and promotions, who might tell their friends and so forth. We usually try to post something two to three times a week, but we don't want to overload with new prices and such in case competition is checking out the page as well."

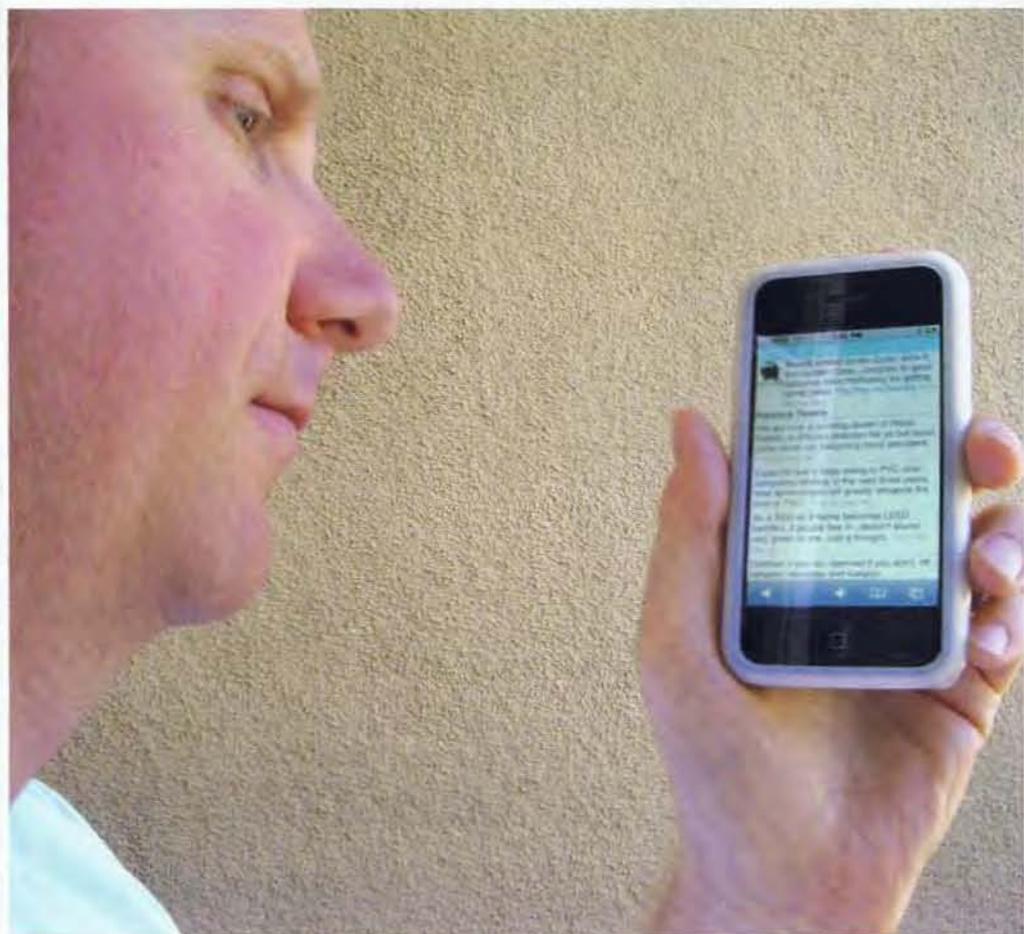
Facebook Frustrations

For Miller Wholesale Lumber, Tempe, Az., "the goal in using Facebook is to get our name out there and hopefully generate business," said Melissa Beaudoin. "It's also to provide more interaction with our customers or potential customers."

Beaudoin has come to realize, however, not to expect a flood of traffic from her company's contractor-customer base. Building a community takes time. "Most of our customers are out on the jobsites, not sitting at desks playing on Facebook all day," she said. "The last post that I made was to announce a contest we are running, and thus far no one has responded. So that tends to be a little disheartening."

As well, Beaudoin added of Miller's two-month-old presence, "it is difficult to come up with good topics to post on the page. I don't think 'another slow day at the lumberyard' is quite appropriate... despite the way the market is."

Nonetheless, posting just for the sake of posting, without saying anything, is worse. Beseiged with an endless torrent of "Looking forward to a great morning!"s and "Just had a deli-



TWITTER can feed short messages direct to your customers' iPhones.

Sweet Tweets

Silvaris Corp.'s logistics team is using Twitter to find available truckers to handle their loads. The wholesaler has an online load board that truckers can book loads from, and every time a logistics team member submits a load to the board it sends a tweet to registered followers.

Around 80 truckers are signed up.

One of their followers recently remarked, "It's great sitting in a truck stop having coffee while searching the load boards and suddenly receiving a tweet for a load that's only 20 miles away!"

HOME DEPOT'S Facebook page, designed to promote its in-store workshops, has nearly 9,000 fans.

Facebook for Beginners



Facebook is the most popular social networking service, where people and organizations can keep in touch with each other through posted messages, images, and more. Businesses and individuals are typically represented on Facebook in three ways: with a personal profile, a public page, or a group.

Profiles, designed for individuals, are viewable only by visitors approved as "friends." You can invite other Facebook users to be your friends (just as they can request to be yours) and, once both parties confirm, you can post to each other's "wall" and have the option of your posts being viewed on their wall and theirs on yours.

Public pages offer many of the same features as profiles, but the set-up is geared to companies rather than individuals (location, hours of operation, date founded, etc.). There's also space for discussions and reviews. Most importantly, public pages are viewable by all visitors, who can easily post to your page by joining as "fans." Business pages, however, cannot directly recruit others to become fans; fans must sign up on their own or be invited by a profile user or through a group.

Groups are usually organized around a common interest, and include similar features, such as a discussion board. Groups can be either public or private, but visitors must join as "members" to be able to post information to the group. Members can join on their own, be invited directly by the

group, or be recruited by other profile users. Former employees from 84 Lumber, Stock Building Supply, and Ganahl Lumber, Anaheim, Ca., have formed groups as a place for alumni to remain in touch.

Although businesses are supposed to create public pages, many instead start off with profiles, which afford more control in building up a fanbase and are often easier to locate. Or, more commonly, they do so unintentionally, because Facebook's main home page encourages first-time visitors to sign up for a profile. Dozens of lumberyards have created profiles, only to later realize their mistake and have to go back and create public page, too, then have to worry about trying to convince the friends to migrate and become fans for the new page.

Experts suggest instead having a business' Facebook "point man" design his or her own Facebook profile, to get their feet wet, learn their way around the network, and experiment without risking the reputation of the company. After that, they can create a public page for the business, while using their profile to direct prospective fans to it.

Other top services include:

Twitter is the fastest growing social networking tool, designed for quick, instant messages, called "tweets," limited to no more than 140 characters.

Reistertown Lumber Co., Reistertown, Md., regularly tweets a good mix of new product news, event announcements, and employee updates at twitter.com/rclumber.

MySpace features a similar networking set-up to Facebook, but is primarily geared to individuals, especially the young, and not businesses. Consequently, the few lumber dealer sites, such as that of Woodland Building Supply, Philadelphia, Pa. (www.myspace.com/214876492), haven't been updated since the advent of Facebook.

LinkedIn is a business networking tool, with over 46 million members in 200 countries, to find, be introduced to, and collaborate with other professionals. Although originally conceived for individuals, LinkedIn now offers company profiles, such as for Foxworth-Galbraith Lumber, Dallas, Tx., and Parr Lumber, Hillsboro, Or., which also maintain pages on online business profilers like **Spoke**.

Plaxo is somewhat like LinkedIn, but formatted like a massive electronic Rolodex.

FlickrR is an image-sharing site that allows visitors to rate the images.

Meek's Lumber, Springfield, Mo., uses flickr (www.flickr.com/photos/meekdesigncenter) to show off new product lines and projects it's supplying, as well as for a companion to its blog posts (meekdesigncenter.wordpress.com).

cious lunch"es, your Facebook friends and fans have the option of "hiding" you, so your posts no longer appear on their sites or, worse, your fans can sever the connection completely.

The flip side is that until your social media pages build up a stable of friends and fans, they can get pretty quiet—and easy to forget about. Edgewater Lumber Co., Augusta, Ga., launched its Facebook page in March "to get the word out" about the company, according to Scott Beach, admitting, "we need to make more posts. Normally we post material from our monthly sales meetings. It's still too early, but once it catches on, it should be a big help."

The best thing is that the risk is minimal and the investment can be zero. Getting started is simple. You probably already have employees who are regular social media users. In fact, of the 86% of surveyed lumber companies without an official Facebook presence, a majority of them were listed as employers on individuals' personal profiles.

Check it out. Your company could be five minutes away from stepping into the 21st Century.

— **Talk Back:** Share your opinions about or adventures on Twitter and Facebook with dkoenig@building-products.com.