

SOCIAL STUDIES

What Type of Social Media Is Best for Your Company?

by Katy Tomasulo

Social media began as a consumer tool in which college students “friended” each other, shared music and gossiped. But in the decade since MySpace and Facebook came onto the scene, social media has evolved into an Internet force that commands the attention of a hefty percentage of web users, young and old. And it’s become a useful marketing tool for brands — even for niche products like engineered wood.

What also has evolved is the number and type of platforms. When we think of social media, most of us immediately think of Facebook, but social media encompasses every type of Web interface we use that offers a push-pull, interactive setup — from commenting on a blog post to writing a review on Amazon.com to having a LinkedIn profile to posting a picture on Instagram.

Why Manufacturers Should Use It

Social media isn’t a replacement for other marketing tools such as press releases, advertising and trade shows. Instead, it’s one more tool in the marketing arsenal — one more way for brands to get their message out to customers and potential customers, and to interact with them immediately.

There are dozens of viable social media tools, with new ones popping up seemingly every week. Thankfully, our industry is slower to adopt new platforms, so there’s a much more manageable list of targets. At a bare minimum, engineered wood manufacturers should position themselves on the three core platforms — Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn — and then evaluate some of the other popular options (such as Pinterest, YouTube, and Instagram) to see what might be an additional fit.

No matter the venue, social media platforms offer an array of advantages, most notably their growing audience. Facebook, for example, recently passed 1 billion users, Twitter has more than 200 million active users, and LinkedIn has 200 million registered users. While this doesn’t mean that 1/7th of the planet is going to be perusing your Facebook page, it does mean that some of your customers are on these platforms. In fact, a recent study by Hanley Wood, publisher of *ProSales* and *Builder* magazines, found that 50 percent of builders, remodelers, and architects use social media. Their top three reasons were to communicate with peers, research products, and research vendors.

Social media also offers an additional way to get your news out and your brand in front of these customers. And unlike other methods of news dissemination, social media is interactive, allowing you to solicit instant feedback, build relationships and answer questions quickly.

Best Practices

The barrier to entry into social media is fairly low, but brands should plan carefully before jumping in. Maximizing the benefits requires strategy, planning, and following some general etiquette and guidelines. Each platform has its own set of specific best practices, but here are five core strategies that can be applied across the board:

1. **Be strategic.** Like all of your marketing efforts, social media needs to have an objective, strategies and tactics that will guide your decision-making and analysis. A good plan will outline: What do we hope to gain and how will we go about it? What type of information will we post? How will we manage our time and who will post? How will we handle feedback, both positive and negative? How will we measure our success and return on investment?
2. **Be a resource.** While social media is a great way to deploy company and product information, it shouldn't be solely self-promotional. To keep people's attention, you also need to post helpful, serviceable content that makes it worth their while to follow you. This means mixing in industry articles, tips and other helpful outside information.
3. **Be interactive.** Keep social media social by encouraging feedback, answering questions and employing proactive tools such as questions and polls.
4. **Be timely.** With that interactivity comes an obligation to be responsive. Respond to questions and feedback quickly — within one business day is ideal.
5. **Be consistent.** You don't have to post at the same time every day, but you do want to post on a regular basis. In other words, don't disappear for weeks on end. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to when you should post, rather use each platform's analytics to determine what time and frequency is generating the best response from your followers.

Best Practices — Facebook

Though it originated as a consumer platform, Facebook is now a prime target for marketers. Users follow their friends as well as their favorite brands, giving them instant access to news and promotions. Building product brands typically will post new product announcements and other news, photos of products and projects, and helpful industry content. Strategies to consider:

- **Build a thorough brand page.** Fill out yours with an engaging cover image, profile image, photo albums and timeline events. The cover image is a great way to draw people in. You also can use it to showcase customers' work or publicize your latest product.
- **Develop a 50/50 posting mix.** Links to helpful articles or simple how-to tips should balance your company and product posts. Adjust your mix based on the responses you're getting.
- **Use images.** Photos tend to get the most engagement. Along with shots of your products, consider posting photos from customers and their projects, glimpses from the field, and even instructional images showing installation best practices.
- **Write enticing posts.** Catch attention in busy news feeds with enticing posts that simultaneously entice them and inform them. Questions and numbers are helpful tools.
- **Follow other brands.** Surf Facebook as your brand; commenting and liking other brands' posts will put your brand name in front of others.

Best Practices — Twitter

Like Facebook, Twitter users follow friends along with news outlets and their favorite brands, with posts showing up in a real-time news feed. Twitter posts must be limited to 140 characters, so you'll need to employ URL shorteners such as bit.ly or those built into social media management tools such as HootSuite. Here are a few best practices to maximize your Twitter experience:

- **Develop an 80/20 post mix.** Even more so than on Facebook, Twitter posts should not be purely self-promotional — shoot for 80 percent industry content to 20 percent company content. You'll draw in a wider swath of industry influencers and participants this way.
- **Think like a newspaper editor.** To catch people's attention in just 140 characters and to get them to click your link, you'll need to be snappy, enticing and meaningful. Communicate what they'll get when they click.
- **Be interactive.** Twitter users expect interaction, so be sure to use the reply functionality to comment on posts and to use retweets to forward others' tweets to your own followers.
- **Consider the "retweetability."** Retweeting a status takes up more characters, so consider making your original post a little shorter to ensure there's room to retweet.
- **Use hashtags effectively.** Hashtags will ensure your posts show up in searches. Do some research to understand which hashtags are most appropriate and most used in your industry. That said, don't put too many in a Tweet, as that can be harder to read and take away from your messaging.

Best Practices — LinkedIn

LinkedIn offers a place to highlight your work life and experience, network with others and seek advice. And it's no longer just about job hunting — it's just as much about networking and idea-sharing for your current job.

Companies can take part in LinkedIn in two ways: via a company page and by following Group discussions.

For a company page, be sure to keep it up to date and completely filled out with product and service information, keeping in mind that it's a portal for customers as well as potential employees and investors. From there, keep the page updated with occasional status updates with company news, new product updates, and industry resources, as well as job opportunities.

Companies also can raise their profile by serving as a resource in Groups. Employees should follow groups within their industry (such as the Structural Components group, the WoodWorks group, the ProSales group, the LBM Journal group, etc.) to keep up on trends and hot issues. When a question arises that the company can provide resources for, an appointed employee can chime in with a non-promotional answer and perhaps a link to more information. Participation in groups should be strictly informational, not self-promotional.

Other Platforms

Along with these three key platforms, a number of other social media outlets offer additional opportunities to manufacturers. Among the favorites:

- **YouTube:** YouTube is a must if you are producing videos. Make sure your video library is uploaded to a branded page, and consider search terms and search engine optimization when writing descriptions.
- **Houzz:** Houzz is a popular site that allows designers, builders, and homeowners to share ideas for home décor, design, and much more. Users can post projects, save others' projects into Ideabooks, comment on images and ask questions, and start discussions. Manufacturers can host a brand page to feature projects with their products, as well as answer questions or point to resources on discussion pages, similar to LinkedIn Groups.
- **Pinterest:** Pinterest is a virtual pinboard, where users can visually bookmark things they see online, from recipes to craft projects to remodeling ideas. Manufacturers can use it to showcase products and projects. Like other platforms, be sure to mix your own products with related but non-self-promotional ideas.
- **Instagram and Flickr:** These are low-maintenance options for posting your product and project images via mobile (Instagram) and Web (Flickr).
- **Vine:** This new platform consists of six-second videos. There's not a lot of use in our industry yet, but it's a fun, low-barrier tool to try out and possibly connect with tech-savvy customers.

Overcoming Challenges

Social media naturally causes trepidation among some brand managers, and rightfully so, considering it involves putting our brands out there for anyone to comment on. Here are some tips for overcoming common concerns.

Responding to feedback

Social media is social, so expect that you'll get feedback — positive, negative or neutral. In most cases, it makes sense to respond to everything in some way within a business day or two.

- **Positive feedback.** Thank the commenter or at the very least give the post a "like." Perhaps there's a case study or testimonial opportunity?
- **Questions:** Acknowledge the question as soon as possible, even if just to say that you'll get back to them. Provide an answer as reply, along with a link to more information if available. Or, if it's too specific or complicated, have them email you to address the question one-on-one offline.
- **Negative feedback.** Don't outright delete a post simply because it is negative — this can backfire. Negative feedback will typically need to be handled on a case-by-case basis. Often it's best to engage your full team in determining the best response. Acknowledge the comment and take it offline if possible by providing contact information. Avoid creating a back-and-forth argument. For example, if someone has a product complaint, let them know that you definitely want to remedy the problem, and provide an email address or phone number (to an actual person) so that it can be resolved specifically.
- **Spam, defamatory language, or otherwise offensive posts.** Delete immediately. Consider banning the poster if the offense is repeated.

Time management

Social media can take a lot of time if you're not organized, particularly if it's tacked on to someone's existing responsibilities. Here are some strategies:

- **Develop a routine.** Creating content means perusing industry publications, websites, and newsletters. Schedule a set time every day, such as while drinking your morning coffee or eating lunch, devoted to gathering new content. Then supplement those efforts by checking into your platforms for a few minutes at several other points during the day.
- **Use management tools.** Tools such as HootSuite or TweetDeck allow you to manage multiple platforms on one screen, track analytics and pre-schedule items ahead of time when appropriate.
- **Create an editorial calendar.** At the beginning of each month, pre-plan some content by penciling in posts that you know you'll have (new product announcements, a weekly project spotlight, a monthly how-to article, etc.). You will still need to fill in your schedule with breaking news and other items, but having a few less time-sensitive items pre-planned can ease the stress of finding content every day.

Managing employees

In order to ensure a consistent voice and response strategy, ensure that only authorized, trained team members are posting on behalf of your brand. First and foremost, create a social media policy that outlines when employees can use social media, who is allowed to post on behalf of the company, and who they should come to when they see something that needs a response. At the same time, encourage staff to provide feedback and to be your eyes and ears. Reps in the field, for example, can be great sources of content such as customer projects and hot topics.

Even with these best practice guidelines, there's no one-size-fits-all solution to social media. Monitor analytics tools to discover what is increasing engagement and experiment with posting times, styles, and frequencies. As your brand moves forward on various platforms, you'll find solutions that work best for your company and its fans.

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