

Social networking can be stepping stone for biz

By Emily J. Cappiello

Social networking is used every day by millions of people of all ages — it has become a part of their everyday lives. Being able to present your business on a social networking site can have many benefits; the sites are a source for active promotion of your name and brand and can drive sales by providing more exposure.

Michael Cheek, manager, Internet technology for Mohawk, said that social networking is important because it has become a primary way for people to communicate. "People are having the conversation anyway and we need to be a part of it," he said. Cheek explained that there are some simple ways that retailers can really take advantage of social networking. First, reserve your store name — whether or not you will be using social networking immediately. This ensures that when you want to use it, your name is what you want it to be and also what customers recognize you as. Secondly, portray your work on social networking sites. "So much of what we do as an industry is visual and it's a way for people to find more paths into your store," Cheek said. Cheek also explained that social networking sites are a way to make sure that customers will share their experi-

ences online — a modern-day version of referral business.

If created and used correctly, social networking also levels the playing field, said Lisbeth Calandrino, director of consumer research at *Fabulous Floors*. "You don't have to be big anymore to have a marketing presence. You need to learn to use your computer," she said. She explained that although people get nervous because of the transparency that comes with social networking sites, there are so many ways to still remain in control. "You can't really make many mistakes. It's really all about fun and building connections. I believe the ones that will make it will be the ones who conquer cyberspace. This is the movement from a flat, ad-based website to the web 2.0, which is the conversation and interaction between the retailer and the customer," Calandrino said. Calandrino suggests that retailers take advantage of all types of online networking tools — social networking sites as well as blogs — and link them all, but she also said that retailers have to make it interesting. "You don't want it to be just about advertising; if you do, no one will want to come to your Facebook page. You need to add anything that is important for you, like a runner's club if you like running, and

build your own place. As for your work, try to get video or photo testimonials and invite your customer to comment. Post about what is going on, say if you are having a color and design meeting. Everyone has to realize that this is where the customer is, this is how you network these days," she said.

Carpet Network, a franchise company that has tried to consistently have a presence on the Internet, has embraced social networking because the benefits have been realized. "[Social networking] has been an interesting challenge, but it is also paying off," said Lenny Rankin, CEO. "It is hitting every segment of society today, so why not be a part of it?"

Rankin explained that social networking sites are a non-invasive way to let people know what is going on while keeping your brand in front of consumers. "It is a piece of the puzzle with helping brand awareness and being there when people need you. We are in front of people and we are getting more exposure and if someone writes something like 'good job' or 'excellent service,' it goes to hundreds of people," he said. Also important is the fact that social networking gives franchise members a chance to hear about what is new and provides a forum for discussion. And retailers aren't the only ones who stand to benefit. Betsy Amoroso, director of corporate communications for Mannington, explained that social networking can give a name and face to a manufacturer, which may boost sales in the long run. "I think social networking is critical for businesses today, because more than ever, consumers like to feel a personal connection with a company they choose to purchase from. Social networks allow that deeper level of communication that just wasn't available before and it draws them into your brand very early on in the purchasing process," she explained.

"We felt that social networking, in particular our new Facebook page, was a great way to make that personal connection; to show consumers that we are not just a company but people with families who share the same cares and concerns that they have," she added.

The only issue she sees is the fact that networks are so open and the things written and communicated are not always able to be controlled. To that, Amoroso said companies have to be able to take the good with the bad. "One of the biggest pros and cons is the transparency this gives your company. You have to be ready to take praise as well as negative feedback and be ready to address anything that comes your way. That said, though, I still believe that consumers today appreciate that transparency, and respect a company that is willing to open itself up like that," Amoroso said. **ENR**



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