Build It and They Will Come

A well-designed website can be an effective sales tool attracting both builder and consumer clients.

Forget about the phone book. By the time customers walk into your showroom, most have already surfed the Internet for product descriptions, choices, and reviews. Most of the time, they know what they want. They're just not sure they want it from you.

An effective web presence ensures that you capture customers as they begin their search, bringing solid leads to your sales staff and sales to your bottom line.

"Having a decent website is sort of the smell test you have to pass in any business," says Jim Rafferty of JMRKeting in Timonium, Md.

"Whatever type of marketing you're doing, they're going to come to your website first," Rafferty says. "Before they walk in the door, before they call, the vast majority are going to take a look and reassure themselves that they want to take that next step—or not."

Before you can create a successful website, you have to ask yourself three questions. What's the goal of your site? Who are your customers? And what do they need or how will they use your site?

Building supply companies struggle with using the web as a successful sales-generating tool, according to Scott Thomas at Parksite Inc. in Apex, N.C. "Traditional companies have struggled because they don't understand web development," he says.

"You have all this information, but there's no one to pull it together, organize it, and use it to generate revenue," Thomas says. "Some don't even bother to collect it."

You have to decide what the goal of your website is going to be. Do

you want to drive traffic to your showroom? How about generating leads for your salespeople? Or provide tools that allow your builder clients to find out what and how much of particular products, say sheets of drywall, you have on hand on any given day?

who their customers actually are: high-end builders, smaller day-to-day builders, do-it-yourselfers, or some combination, according to Tom Morse of Woodbury & Morse Advertising in Portland, Maine. But knowing who they are is an important component in your overall web

wholesale-only distributor's site is that every landing page has a form to fill out for more information. The form takes less than 30 seconds to fill out and submit.

The website provides useful links to pages offering product categories, further links to companies providing those products, where you find additional links to more information, photos, brochures, and green-building product information. Each step, the website provides a phone number to call an American Lumber sales rep, or an e-mail link to contact the company.

"Before they walk in the door, before they call, the vast majority are going to take a look and reassure themselves that they want to take that next step—or not," says Jim Rafferty of JMRKeting.

"The goals have to be clear first. That's step one in any kind of marketing," Rafferty says.

Parksite set a goal of redirecting visitors to better sites. There was a good reason.

As a distributor selling brands from a variety of manufacturers, providing information about all the products created a colossal challenge. Instead, the company created a site linking customers to manufacturers' websites where they can find detailed product information, such as MSDS sheets.

"We want to be able to capture people when they're researching products," Thomas says. "So you can go back and forth between our site and the manufacturer site. We want to brand Parksite's name alongside those manufacturer brands."

The website also allows visitors to request quotes, which the distributor uses to generate leads for its dealer clients. "We might make a first call [to the person requesting a quote, say for a Corian countertop], and then we give it to one of our customers," Thomas says. "We see it as a value-add for our dealer network."

Who Are Your Customers?
A lot of companies struggle to know

strategy.

"The building industry is in a tough spot in that their primary target audience, builders, isn't necessarily the group of people who are spending all their time on Facebook and Twitter or online," Morse says.

While a lot of their customers spend a fair amount of time in front of a computer every day, the rest—the guys building one or two houses a year, remodelers, and cabinetmakers—spend most of their time on jobsites or in their trucks.

"There are all kinds of wonderful things that building supply retailers can build into their sites, but how much time does their audience have to spend with the site?" Morse says.

What Do They Want?
For Walden, N.Y.-based American Lumber, the landing page for a product on its website serves as an interactive brochure, with more complete product descriptions and often the ability to view pertinent photos or charts, says marketing director Joshua Kaye,

"There are one-button sharing tools on the page so that a visitor can instantly post this page to social media or forward it to a colleague or client," Kaye says.

An important feature of the

"We don't want visitors just passively absorbing information about a product," Kaye says. "We want to hook them so they give us their contact information. Then we can convert these to pull-through sales through the visitor's dealer of choice or their nearest stocking dealer."

Don't forget about those smaller guys that stop by your yard every morning for a cup of coffee and a load of lumber to start their day. While they may not spend time on a computer in an office, most now have smart phones, making access for mobile devices an important part of website design.

"You have a potential opportunity where you have somebody driving around in his truck looking for something right now," Rafferty says.

Lumberyards and dealers provide a real service to builders when they offer them the ability to download invoices, submit orders, check inventory, or even buy shirts and hats, all though a smart phone app.

And Morse says remember the consumer. She may not be buying 2x4s, but she might be dreaming about a new deck or kitchen. You want your website to give her options that inspire. "Make it attractive," he says. "You want to upsell." *—Steve Campbell*