



For flooring dealers to compete successfully in attracting and retaining qualified installers, they should not overlook the importance of their own store brand being communicated consistently and well-managed online to create the right image. Since customer satisfaction is hard-wired to installation timeliness and quality, this issue is, in a word, paramount.

According to a recent Associated Press report, a survey of 375 home improvement dealers found that two-thirds had difficulty hiring skilled workers last year, and that the problem had gotten worse since 2016.

THE VALUE OF THE BRAND IN RECRUITING

A store's brand is more than its name, its logo or its slogan. To the customer, who is the true "owner" of the brand, it is the totality of their experience. So in addition to a name, logo and slogan, a brand is all about where and how it communicates, the service it provides, the selection of flooring and accessories it has available, and the quality of the store environment as well as the quality of the people who represent it. The sum total of these areas defines a brand, so any part that falters damages the whole.

If the recent dealer survey in this month's issue of Floor Focus is any indication, many dealers probably do need a "branding checkup." A solid, well-defined and differentiated store brand is essential across a myriad of concerns expressed in the survey, not the least of which is the installer issue.

With a smaller pool of installer candidates to draw from, the prize catch will go to the dealer who has the best lure, packaged in a professionally presented and engaging brand. The sober reality is this: it's estimated that for every five workers retiring from construction-related industries, only one is entering it.

If there's one thing we are all weaned on in today's culture, it's branding. It is the currency of a free economy. And before you scoff at that notion, consider that qualified floorcovering installer candidates are just like floorcovering shoppers. They're both looking for indications, either consciously or subconsciously, that they will be happier by choosing one brand over another.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ONLINE PRESENCE

Nowadays, branding is most evident online. So, any store brand worth working for, or contracting with, will be easily recognized by its presence on and mastery of digital media. That's important because the new generation of installers was born with a wireless mouse in their hands. If a brand looks like a throwback because its website, social media, digital advertising or customer communication management isn't current, cool or even visible, it may not get that second look. The simple fact is that if a brand's not meeting an unspoken expectation of top-notch Millennial and Gen-Z candidates in a low unemployment economy, it's on to the next opportunity.

Part of the challenge facing flooring dealers and the flooring industry in general is the stigma attached to jobs like floor installation, according to Silvia Lattoz, governance and global relations senior manager at the National Kitchen and Bath Association, "Younger people aren't interested in construction careers because they think the jobs don't pay well, are too dirty

or physically demanding, or mistakenly think the jobs don't use much technology." Savvy dealers looking to attract sharp young installation talent take note.

Store brands that embrace leveraging digital media will benefit in the hiring arena, so says recruiting guru Paula Parris of staffing powerhouse Soliant. She describes platforms such as LinkedIn and even Facebook as part of a "recruiting tool belt." "Transparency, flexibility, open and consistent communication, clearly-set expectations, organizational health (culture) and opportunities to advance are qualities that top candidates, whether full-time staff or contract, are looking for and can be reflected in a store's social media personality," says Parris.

TIPS FOR USING DIGITAL MEDIA TO ATTRACT INSTALLERS

How else might a dealer leverage digital media as a brand campaign that resonates with installers? Running ads for openings is fine, but a brand must also project a culture of installation excellence with both high expectations and professional respect for the craft and skill of floor installation.

- Consider a short video or series of videos targeted to qualified installers by introducing a brand, its standards and inviting them to apply
- Produce a video message encouraging a career in flooring installation by contacting Certified Flooring Installers (CFI) or World Floor Covering Association for more information
- Be an online advocate of educational events, such as CFI's "Build My Future—Flooring Edition" and add this to articles about flooring installation in its blog rotation
- Celebrate its top installations and give credit to its crews on Facebook
- Provide incentives for recruiting new installers who pass a trial period
- Recognize the best installers on a regular basis
- Tout use of the latest installation and estimation technology
- Promote professional installation standards, certifications and training on the website and through social media
- Remain keenly aware and responsive to online reviews, especially regarding installation issues
- Seek feedback on customer satisfaction and testimonials regarding installation
- Post about internal installer training sessions on social media feed
- Use LinkedIn to search for candidates and promote openings

- Check out and post openings on any number of popular employment sites (CareerBuilder, ZipRecruiter and others)

In all these ways and others, a brand is taking a leadership position; advocating quality, professional installations for its customers; and putting it at the top of the pecking order for the best candidates. This consistent "installation-excellence" mindset and message should become a part of every brand culture—a culture that will be impressive to customers as well.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO SCREEN FOR THE BEST

Flooring dealers are upping their digital game in setting the qualifications of new candidates as well. Susan Weller, COO of Flooring Careers, a recruiting firm exclusively committed to the needs of the flooring industry, has observed this phenomenon first hand. "To be useful to a flooring company in 2019, employees will most likely be required to use a CRM package, text message, be attentive to emails and quickly respond on social media platforms," says Weller. "I'm seeing both retailers and manufacturers alike faced with a workforce that is either slow or refusing to adapt to the digital world we now live in. Many of my clients are 'upgrading' their employees to interact with the new consumer who prefers digital communication." And this includes installers too. The more a brand embraces digital media, the more likely it is to find candidates who embrace it too.

Strong brands are well-defined and differentiated. Strong brands have a message that reflects quality in the product and service it provides and the people who provide it. And strong brands have an "omni-online" presence. That's how strong store brands are attractive to the most qualified customers and installer candidates alike. It's paramount. ■



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Floor Focus Magazine