

Word-of-web referrals



How landscape professionals are using Porch, a new online home improvement platform.

BY SARAH PFLEDDERER

Like many small business owners, most of Mike Champagne's leads come from word-of-mouth referrals—75 percent, he says.

It's not that the owner of American Blade Runners Lawn care in Charlotte, N.C., hasn't tried other means of marketing. There was the time he distributed 5,000 fliers, but that only got him one call. It's disappointments like these that led to his reliance on referrals.

And it's for that reason he's putting some of his trust in the website Porch as an extension of his word-of-mouth marketing.

The online home improvement network connects homeowners and professionals for free and does so by vetting companies on the same values neighbors do when referring others to a business, such as a company's service

perimeters, pricing and quality of service.

Porch CEO Matt Ehrlichman created the company about two years ago from a homeowner's perspective, using it as a solution to some of the struggles he faced when building his home.

"It's so hard to have any idea what it's going to cost and it's so challenging to know who really is going to be the best professional to work with for my specific home," he says. "Porch was started to make that process easier for homeowners and to help professionals and small businesses around the country be able to get not just more business but the right kind of business."

It achieves this through populating Porch profiles with photos of professionals' projects, including details on those such as the project cost and location. Porch uses that information, in addition to the number of "positive endorsements," to determine where a professional will fall in a homeowner's search rankings.

"We use data and information home-

In addition to photos, Porch urges users to upload project pricing and location details.

owners are going to have a tremendous amount of confidence in," Ehrlichman says.

The company had a relatively quiet launch in 2013, officially going live in September, but it had reached out to professionals to join the site more than a year in advance. Of the 1.5 million home improvement professionals on the site, 4 percent identify as "landscapers," according to Porch.

Darwin Webb, president of Darwin Webb Landscape Architects in Issaquah, Wash., was one of the initial professionals contacted to join the site.

"After a couple conversations, I instantly saw the value in what they were doing," he says. "They really took the lead on helping me set up my profile."

Promotional perks

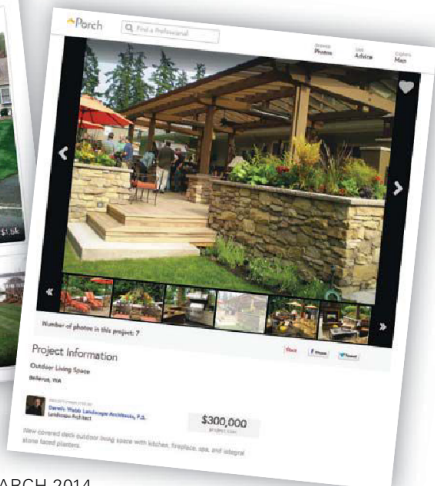
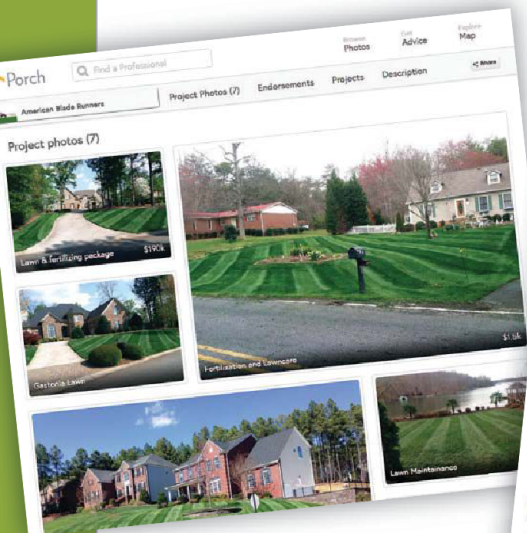
While Webb hasn't gotten any leads directly through Porch yet, he sees it as a more reliable customer referral source than other home improvement sites.

"There's certainly no downside to trying (Porch) out and if you're not getting what you think you need out of them, you can always bow out," he says.

And this is somewhat Webb's plan. He's waiting to see results from his profile before dishing out an optional \$35 monthly subscription fee to heighten his marketability through Porch.

It is free for professionals to enroll and run a Porch profile, but by paying a subscription fee, which is how Porch profits, professionals' projects can be highlighted in Porch's marketing materials, such as emails sent to homeowners.

continued on page 28





continued from page 26

The fee does not increase professionals' visibility on the Porch website itself to ensure homeowners are seeing the most highly endorsed companies in their area, not the ones who pay the most for a higher ranking.

"In different places, we can proactively give them more exposure and highlight them, but we do that without breaking the trust of homeowners," Ehrlichman says.

An added layer to Porch's marketing comes from the company's strategic partnership with Lowe's, which was announced in January.

Through the partnership, signage in Lowe's stores informs customers to refer to Porch to find a local professional to help them with their project. Moreover, Lowe's employees are trained to connect customers to Porch professionals in store for services the retailer doesn't offer.

That partnership initially was instituted in 139 stores in North Carolina, South Carolina and the Seattle area, where Porch is headquartered. It will gradually roll out to more than 1,700 Lowe's stores.

Champagne says he's already seen signs in his local Lowe's and expects that exposure to generate more leads for him via Porch, especially in the spring when outdoor projects are top of mind for customers. Although, like Webb, he has yet to receive any leads through Porch.

Reliability distinguishers

The Lowe's partnership is a prime way Porch now sets itself aside from competitors, such as Angie's List, Yelp and Houzz, Ehrlichman says. Another distinction is Porch doesn't allow users to post negative reviews at this time to avoid professionals being "gamed" by competitors.

"Professionals right now use Porch as their definitive resume, so we want that to positively represent their work," Ehrlichman says. "At some point it's important to create an experience for homeowners where they get all of the information they need.

Before we do any of that stuff, we want to do a very good job of verifying it's a homeowner who's actually used that professional."

Thus, negative reviews eventually will be a part of the site for the homeowner's benefit, Ehrlichman says, but the company is figuring ways to ensure posts are authentic before launching the feature.

For the time being, Porch merely allows homeowners to provide "positive endorsements" of companies. The



CEO Matt Ehrlichman's tip sheet for Porch users to increase their visibility on the site:

- 1 Upload as many projects as possible, making sure to include their addresses and pricing, so Porch knows which customers to target for you.
- 2 Provide customer email addresses to Porch for it to garner endorsements for your page.
- 3 Post a headshot of yourself on the site to personalize your page.

more endorsements a company has, the more viewable they are to neighbors of the person who endorsed them.

"That's where homeowners have the most confidence," Ehrlichman says, referring back to the notion that neighborly referrals are viewed as the most trustworthy.

But how does Porch know whose neighbor is whose? In uploading projects to their Porch profiles, professionals are encouraged to provide the project's addresses.

"That gives us the insight to know when to feature that professional correctly," Ehrlichman says, clarifying that Porch never shows a customers' address on the website. "We anonymize it. It's completely private." (See map example at left.)

Another detail professionals are encouraged to include is the price of the projects. Porch says this information helps homeowners quickly identify the company as being in their price range or not.

Including such details—location and pricing—are entirely optional, though.

Champagne, for instance, only posts the price of his residential projects, not the commercial ones.

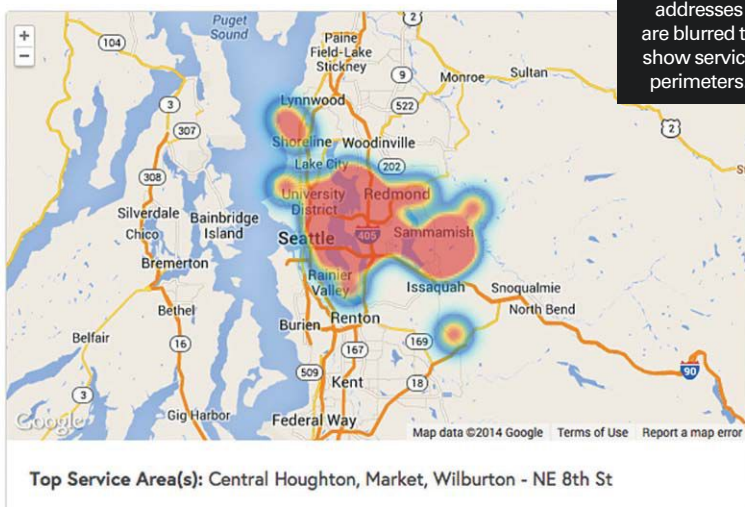
"That's kind of like putting your bids out for everybody to see," he says.

Profile creation, upkeep

There are two ways to build a profile: 1) manually uploading projects and photos or 2) sending a spreadsheet of project data, such as through Excel, to the Porch team

continued on page 31

Project locations



Project addresses are blurred to show service perimeters.

Top Service Area(s): Central Houghton, Market, Wilburton - NE 8th St



continued from page 28

for it to import to the profile. It's on that spreadsheet where professionals provide project addresses, pricing and customer email addresses if they'd like the company to request endorsements for them.

Although Porch employees are hands on with helping professionals set up their profiles, they do not upload the information from spreadsheets by hand, so to speak. That data importation process is completed using "a combination of employee curation and proprietary software" the company wrote to process spreadsheets, Ehrlichman says.

Champagne, who joined Porch in November, chose to manually upload his projects, and he did so right from his phone. Still, he says, Porch employees were very involved in his profile building process.

"They are determined to try to make sure you have your information out there so they can better promote you," he says. "They'll hound me to death on pictures or endorsements from my customers."

Champagne's greatest struggle with the site is setting aside time to upload recent projects, plus he prefers to post before-and-after photos once his installation jobs have filled in, which can take up to a year.

He has nine projects uploaded to his profile. Webb, who has been on Porch almost a year longer, has 54 projects listed.

"The more projects, the better," Webb says. "The more projects you have photos of, the better."

Because Porch profiles are highly photo-driven, Webb says he's extra attentive to the quality of project photos he uploads to the site.

"Having pictures of projects, is more valuable than descriptions," he says.

"Images are always better than words and good images are always better than poor images." (See Web Extra.)

Webb recalls going the spreadsheet route when building his pro-

file and says his projects were uploaded smoothly and reliably.

"I'm not the best at computer stuff, but they were very helpful," he says. "It doesn't matter if you're a CAD guy, an IT guy or just a design professional. They make it pretty easy."

His single criticism, however, is the placement of the projects on his profile.

"That's the one thing that I'm still not crazy about. I want to be able to rearrange the way in which the photos are presented," he says. "I'm not 100 percent satisfied yet."

Once Webb has his projects organized to standard, he says then he'll press customers to view and endorse his profile. **LM**

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For advice from photographer Tiffany Morisue on capturing and posting web-friendly images to sites such as Porch, visit the Web Extras section at LandscapeManagement.net.