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Savvy businesses understand they can use **Facebook** as a tool to increase their sales, showcase their products and services and build their audiences. One of the ways they do so is through contests. Here, we explore three firms that have used Facebook contests to their advantage.

**Company:** Weed Pro

**Location:** Sheffield Village, Ohio

**Facebook contests:** A coloring contest, a minor league baseball promotion and a Father's Day contest

PHOTOS: ISTOCK-INTERNATIONAL INC.

**Facebook contests are a popular way for businesses to ramp up promotions. Here's some advice from three Green Industry companies that have tried them.**

BY **MOLLY BEALIN**

**W**eed Pro, based in Sheffield Village, Ohio, is no stranger to Facebook contests. It's been hosting them for the past three years. Prizes have included a \$75 gift card and the chance to throw the first pitch at the Lake Erie Crushers' minor league baseball game.

In designing its promotions, Weed Pro monitors its Facebook Timeline to discover how its fans spend their time. "The key to gaining participation is to choose something people are passionate about," says Weed Pro Director of Marketing Shaun Canary. "We reach out to our fan base to see what kind of contest they want."

The company's Facebook contests also are built around promoting its new products. Take, for example, Weed Pro's Father's Day contest, where the contestant with the worst lawn was awarded a year-long fertilizing package.

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## FACEBOOK CONTESTS

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"It's always a goal of ours to expand our social reach with our customer base," Canary says. "We hope that customers will share their knowledge of our company with friends."

Under Facebook's guidelines, all contests must be run via a Facebook contest app, a third-party application that sits on a Facebook page and increases traffic to it. As director of marketing, Canary manages all of Weed Pro's contests and social media traffic. He uses the Tabsite and Shortstack apps. Tabsite includes drag-and-drop design, pre-made templates and "like gate" options. Its price is based on the scope of the competition, but there's a \$10-a-month option. The average cost to run contests using Shortstack, on the other hand, is \$30 a month. The app includes drag-and-drop design, templates, widgets, share features, a mobile version, videos and a "like gate."

According to Canary, Weed Pro's Facebook page gained 500 new fans after its first Facebook contest and an additional 300 after its second. Weed Pro currently has 1,067 Facebook followers.

In addition to one contest having a grand prize of throwing out the first pitch during a Lake Erie Crushers game as part of the "Summertime Fun at the Crushers" campaign, four people were chosen to compete in on-the-field contests during a game.

"The first contest was themed around our home perimeter pest spray that keeps bugs out of your home and featured a contest where the kids would throw plastic bugs into a box that had pictures of a house on it," says Canary. "The child that had the most bugs in the house won a \$50 gift certificate to the Crushers store in the stadium."

The second game, he said, centered on the company's summer recovery fertilizing program. Children raced around the bases, picking up and putting on an article of the Weed Pro uniform. At the last stop, they picked up a fake bag of fertilizer and threw it into a spreader. The winner also received a gift card to the team shop.

The promotion led to 250 registrants that were both current customers and Crushers fans who were in the market for Weed Pro's services. The contest, in combination with other marketing efforts, helped the campaign net nearly \$6,000 in sales.

**Company:** Meyers Landscape & Nursery

**Location:** Columbus Pike, Ohio

**Facebook contest:** Ugliest lawn

**M**eyers Landscape & Nursery of Columbus Pike, Ohio, decided to award contestants for keeping their lawns ugly in its first Facebook contest, last May. Primarily a residential company, Meyers had 14 contestants upload and share photos of their ugly lawns to try to attract likes and comments.

The photo with the most unique interactions between users, along with the best story, was the winner of yard cleanup services valued at \$2,000. This year's winner got his ground leveled after having to dig up his land to install a gas line.

"We just came up with the idea in February because we wanted to increase our followers and stir up engagement and dialogue with customers and followers," says Sara Lorz, Meyers marketing specialist. "The idea came from years of marketing experience."

Lorz first qualified contestants by determining whether they were in the company's defined geographic area. The rest of the decision power was placed on the Facebook voters.

"Our hope was that the people who entered their home would share the uploaded photo, thereby increasing our Facebook visibility," she says.

The target audience for the contest was homeowners between the ages of 27 and 65 who lived within a 30-mile radius of Meyers headquarters. Facebook allows users to narrow their target advertising that way.



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## FACEBOOK CONTESTS

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As marketing specialist, Lorz handles most of Meyers' social media. The company conducted online research and attended webinars to get ideas for the contest and to put the concept together.

"All in all we were happy with the results, but moving forward we would more than likely tweak the way we ran Facebook contests," she says. "For example, we would more than likely use the unique votes to narrow down the finalists to the top three-fourths and then decide on the winner internally, maybe have the personal stories weigh in a bit in the decision."

She says Facebook rules and company goals guide her when designing the contest. As such, she uses an approved app.

"The app we used was called WooBox," says Lorz. "I used this because it was mentioned as an app that was fairly easy to set up in one of the articles I read prior to starting the contest. I would use it again. I had no problems with it."

Lorz says that fewer than \$400 was spent on the contest, and the company has already seen a return on that investment through a few jobs that resulted from the Facebook contest.

"We have seen a dramatic increase in the engagement of our followers," says Lorz. "We have also seen an increased number of followers. After we had this contest we went from 18 followers to 130. That's a crazy good jump in followers."

To promote the contest, Lorz says, the company did both "like our page" advertising, which shows up along the right hand-side of Facebook pages, and promoted posts with a contest graphic that linked to the company's contest page on Facebook. The ads then show up on Facebook fans' news feeds.

After the success of the ugly lawn contest, Meyers anticipates more Facebook contests to come.

"We are planning on doing more contests in the future," says Lorz. This one stirred up a lot of talk and we saw a lot of the benefits of social media."

**Company: Dowco Enterprises**

**Location: Chesterfield, Mo.**

**Facebook contest: Pet pageant**

**D**owco Enterprises, which serves both residential and commercial clients, completed its second Facebook contest in June, when it crowned the winner of its pet pageant contest. Twenty-eight contestants sent in pictures of their pets in a landscape setting. Nearly all were dogs. The picture with the most likes was the winner of \$200 in Dowco credit.

"It just came to me," says Kelly Dowell, Dowco's director of sales and marketing of how she devised the contest. "I go



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base has inspired Dowco to plan more contests in the future, next of which will be a fall

family photo contest coming later in the year.

“I think [contests are] an overall win for the company and the client,

says Dowell. “We don’t normally do discounts or giveaways. Having contests gets people looking at our page and talking about our business and it gives them the opportunity to save money.” **LM**

*Bealin is a Cleveland-based contributor to Landscape Management magazine.*

out and look at people’s property a lot. People always have their dogs and cats outside and they take good pictures.”

Dowco’s contest last July was a container and garden contest. Contestants submitted photos of container plantings and garden spaces. Thirteen photos of self-created containers were submitted with the same prize of \$200 Dowco credit, which went to the photo with the most likes.

Dowell, who manages the company’s Facebook page herself, says she has not used an app for Dowco’s past contests. She’s organized and regulated them herself.

“I had clients submit photos to my email address,” says Dowell. “I saved them until the deadline and then posted them to the page. We want to get as many people, specifically clients, to look at our page as possible. We want to make things fun and engaging for clients.”

Dowco has seen visible gains in its Facebook following as a result of the two contests. Between June 1 and June 17, the when the pet pageant contest took place, Dowco’s Facebook page got 27 new likes. The pictures from the contests generated 208 likes and 46 comments. Dowco’s Facebook page currently has 667 likes.

“It heightens awareness and provides a warm, fuzzy feeling so when there is a need they think of us,” says Dowell. “Our main goal is to keep clients engaged with Dowco. We are also able to use their photos for marketing purposes.”

Winners were issued the credit to their accounts through Dowco’s software program and sent a congratulatory note letting them know they had won. The increased following and fan

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# MARKET WATCH

DESIGN/BUILD

## Fostering feedback

Client advisory boards provide business owners an outside perspective. *By* EMILY SCHAPPACHER

Jeffrey Scott cuts right to the chase. “Clients are always analyzing your company,” says the Green Industry consultant. “As the center of your business, they experience the good and the bad of what your company has to offer, and they have already formulated an opinion, whether you know it or not.”

To find out what these opinions are—and to glean a lot of other invaluable information at the same time—some business owners are turning to client advisory boards. Members of a client advisory board are chosen by the business owner to meet together and share their perspectives about the parts of a company that work, the parts that don’t and the parts that could be improved. The meetings can also be a

good opportunity to test new strategies, products, marketing initiatives and services on a captive audience that’s there to give honest, straightforward feedback.

Depending on a business’ goals and resources, client advisory boards can take on a variety of forms. Some meet multiple times a year, some meet only once. Some are formal affairs with many participants and others take place with three or four people over a casual lunch. Scott also describes three different ways to lead client advisory boards—one type is led by a facilitator without the business owner present, another is led by both the facilitator and the business owner, and the third is led by the business owner alone. But despite the structure, there are some key steps to follow to ensure the

meeting is an effective use of time that will benefit both the business and the client in the long run.

“A client advisory board is an idea you can execute immediately and have an immediate impact on the bottom line,” says Scott. “You get complete clarity from a sales, marketing and customer service perspective.”

“A client advisory board is an idea you can execute immediately and have an immediate impact on the bottom line.”

—Jeffrey Scott



### CHOOSING THE RIGHT CLIENTS

One of the first steps to a successful client advisory board is choosing the right clients to participate. Glenn Bonick, owner of Bonick Landscaping in Dallas, conducted a client advisory board meeting in March. His goal was to generate as much feedback as possible, and Bonick chose six individuals that represented a thorough sampling of his client base to participate. He also made sure to choose clients he had good experiences with in the past to receive constructive criticism rather than complaints.

“You don’t want to get all males or all females, or all people from the same income bracket. A cross-section of customers tends to feed off of each other,” Bonick says. “You also don’t want it to



be a bitch session, so you don't want to bring in clients who are disgruntled. You want people who are generally pleased with the process so they will give honest, helpful feedback."

Like Bonick, many business owners strive to select a fair representation of their clientele for advisory boards—a mixture of new and old residential and commercial clients who are both men and women of diverse ages. But Scott says an even better approach is to gather the type of customer business owners want more of. By understanding what these ideal clients want and need, the company has a better chance of attracting more of them. Also, these clients typically have more interaction with various departments within the company, so they tend to have more opinions to share.

*"You don't want to get all males or all females, or all people from the same income bracket. A cross-section of customers tends to feed off of each other."*

—Glenn Bonick



"You want to target the most comprehensive clients that make you the most money," Scott says. "The clients who use the most services also see the most mistakes, such as when handoffs within the company don't work. The client often becomes the victim of that."

Bonick says his experience with the client advisory board made the good relationships he already had with the participants even better. He plans to host another advisory board in the fall, and continue to host one or two per year with different groups of people each time.

"Since the event, some have called me up just to see how I'm doing," Bonick says. "That really shocked me that people were that interested in our business and our success."

Scott agrees it's a good idea to review the list of participants and consider inviting

new clients before each board meeting. Not only will this diversity ensure fresh perspectives, but, as company strategies change over time, so may the ideal client. Depending on the goal of the advisory board, some clients may be a better fit than others at different times.

As for compensation, Scott says it's not necessary. He suggests holding the advisory board over a nice meal, ideally at a restaurant that's conveniently accessible by all participants. Holding the meeting over food tends to loosen people up and get them talking, Scott says, and the free meal is the business owner's way of thanking the clients for their participation.

"It's in the clients' interest to be there because they want you to be doing a better job," Scott says. "If they are not willing to show up or will only come for money, it indicates that you don't have a great relationship with them and you have a bigger problem."

## ASKING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

Another consideration for a successful client advisory board is asking the right questions to get the most useful feedback. This is when it can come in handy to have a third-party professional moderate the meeting and ask the questions the business owner may not feel comfortable asking. Scott has done this for at least 20 landscape companies and says this is when he often gets the most candid feedback and a true picture of what's really going on inside the business from the customer's point of view.

"Asking the right questions means asking the tough questions," says Scott. "Questions business owners might be embarrassed to hear the answers to."

Kevin Cryan, president of Cryan Landscape Contractors in Seekonk, Mass., hired Scott to lead a client advisory board in 2012. The information Scott obtained from the group was a "breath of fresh air" for Cryan. It reinforced things he already suspected, while shining a light on issues he never would have known about. For example, he never expected one client, a subcontractor, to say that his favorite thing

*"This is another way to work on your business instead of in it."*

—Kevin Cryan



about Cryan Landscape Contractors is receiving an invoice quickly so he can, in turn, bill his clients sooner. Another insight: Cryan had suspected he was too involved in the day-to-day operations of the company and that he needed to trust his employees to have more client interaction, a thought that was confirmed by the advisory board.

Cryan also was pleased to hear that his clients notice and appreciate the different ways his company supports the local community, like sponsoring tee-ball teams and golf tournaments, and working with United Way, the Rotary Club and the YMCA.

"That's not why we do it, but sometimes you think you don't get any credit for community involvement," Cryan says. "So it was cool that the customers actually mentioned it, know we are involved and that they like that."

Both Bonick and Cryan say they invested just a few hours of time and less than \$1,500 for a client advisory board meeting, including the consultant fee and the meal. And they agree it was an inexpensive investment for the information they gleaned. Both men also agree the benefits have since infiltrated their companies, allowing them to provide better direction and leadership for their employees and better service and experiences for all of their customers.

"This is another way to work on your business instead of in it," Cryan says. "A lot of owners struggle with taking time to work on their business because they are busy putting out fires. But you have to work on your business to prevent those fires in the first place."

*Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.*