

Digital Tools: Improving On-the-Job Communication in an Online World

Part one in our three-part series looking at how residential builders are embracing technology:

Imagine a residential construction company that's been in business for 25 years. That company has seen the popularization of email usage, digital cameras, and video conferencing; the advent of DVD players, high-speed internet, smart phones, and social media; and a vast expansion of the internet. A company that went into business in just 1995 has come of age in during some of the most fast-paced tech advances we've ever seen.

But it wasn't until 2020 that those companies have really had to put their digital communication tools to the test. According to a late-March survey commissioned by ANGI Homeservices, 85% of residential construction pros have made at least one major change to their customer communications during the COVID-19 pandemic, including increased use of email lists, social media, and video chat. A third of respondents (32%) say they have enhanced direct communication with customers and clients before accepting new business.

The work-from-home era has shined a light on the importance of having effective communication tools to work with both employees and clients. Here are a few examples of how residential pros have capitalized on digital communication.

Client Connection

Staying in close contact with clients is essential to managing expectations, gauging the client's mood and experience, and assuring them that they're an important part of your business. Denver-based Curbio has done this by leveraging its online customer portal. "With some tweaks to our process and services, we can take on the entire pre-sale renovation with zero in-person contact," the company explains on its website. Project walkthroughs and estimates happen virtually, and all document signatures and client communications take place through their online portal.

Industry service providers like HomeAdvisor and Houzz have also turned to virtual communication to help connect pros and homeowners. New tools offered through HomeAdvisor's mobile app let professionals and their clients connect via in-app video messaging, and manage financial transactions. "We wanted to create features and tools to help both homeowners and pros seamlessly interact in a socially distant manner while completing these essential repairs," says ANGI Homeservices CEO Brandon Ridenour in a statement. (ANGI Homeservices is the parent company of HomeAdvisor and Angie's List.)

The new Houzz Pro platform lets pros manage business activities and client communications with built-in messaging, estimating tools, photo and document sharing, and timeline tracking. The company found that almost two in five professionals were adopting remote collaboration tools, and more than 25% were implementing online tools for document approval, contract, approval, invoicing, and payments.

Facetime with the Team

With homeowner communication addressed, firms can't forget to keep up the communication among the staff as well. The New York Times recently cited the author of a forthcoming paper in the Academy of Management Journal that studied the importance of small talk at the office.

“What we found was that the employees who engaged in more small talk – it didn't matter with whom – ended up feeling more positive emotions,” says co-author Jessica Methot. “It made them feel more recognized, more acknowledged, and gave them a sense of connection with people. It made them willing to go out of their way to help their coworkers.”

As work-from-home has dramatically increased during the pandemic, even among construction firms deemed essential, many companies are looking for ways to keep that office vibe going. Mashable reported in March that instant messaging platform Slack, frequently used by office teams, saw a huge surge in activity as work moved away from the office. The company hit 1 million users in October of 2015. On Tuesday, March 10, CEO Stewart Butterfield announced the company hit 10 million users. Within two weeks, that had grown to 12.5 million.

Investing in software and Apps like Slack are an important first step to making sure coworkers can still communicate with each other in a more meaningful and casual way than email can provide. Evelyn Lee, AIA and senior experience designer for Slack outlined additional practices that help make digital communication work, even in nontraditional settings.

“The value of face-to-face communication will never go away, but videoconferencing is the next best thing for a remote workforce,” Lee says in an article for Architect magazine. “Get comfortable with video calls and use them liberally, especially as other means of communication are going awry.” She also recommends that employers do their best to provide employees with the hardware and tools they need (e.g., laptops and reliable internet access if they don't already have them, cloud file storage, etc.).

Some construction-industry companies went further than improving direct staff communication during the work day. Chester, Pa.-based Power Home Remodeling worked hard to engage its team beyond the daily grind of projects and email. Building on an already strong company culture, Power developed a multi-prong engagement approach that included weekly virtual town hall meetings, wellness programs, a speaker series, and even a talent show. With that level of outreach, a survey of Power employees showed that 96% felt supported during the

crisis, even though thousands of employees were furloughed, and 95% were enthusiastic to return to work.

Digital communication has come a long way in a short time, and the current business climate gives companies of all sizes the opportunity to maximize these great technologies. Implementing the right combination of hardware, software, productivity, and connection will help ensure that employees and clients receive the best level of communication your company can offer, without skipping a beat.

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