

PAINT'S

DIGITAL

FUTURE

E-commerce is changing the way people shop for paint. Here's how one ALLPRO member incorporated it into their business plan.

If you're an independent paint retailer, chances are one of the most important aspects of your business is creating a memorable in-store experience. Doing so entails everything from ordering quality supplies, products and accessories to hiring a team that will guarantee positive customer feedback and name recognition in the local community. The next big challenge? Maintaining that level of service and authenticity as an online business.



While most independent paint retailers generate a large percentage of sales in store, it's no surprise that today's consumers rely on a combination of internet and in-store advice when starting a new project. Old-school shoppers might love the process of visiting stores to pick up color swatches, discuss color palettes and gain inspiration for home decor needs, but more tech-savvy renovators do all this at home via sites like Pinterest, Google and Houzz.

This dichotomy is something that Kelly Scott, general manager of Barrydowne Paint in Ontario, Canada, learned firsthand when

faced with the challenge of revamping the company's website. "In the '90s, customers would spend countless hours in our design centers," Scott said. "Today, they march directly to the chip display—smartphone in hand—to pick out a handful of colors and then they either head for the door or place an order for paint. We knew we needed to be where our customers spend most of their

time, and that means online."

So how is an established business supposed to adapt to changing times and customer needs? Having a solid understanding of how they like to shop online is important, something Scott learned after relaunching Barrydowne's site in September 2017. "We spent upwards of \$20,000 on a brand-new site

earlier that year and quickly realized it wasn't going to realize our vision," she said. "It was a beautiful site, but it might as well have been for clothes: It didn't deliver an experience that matched the way consumers and contractors actually shop for paint."

Another hurdle: Barrydowne had just opened its third store, in Val Caron, Ontario. The expense of rent, signage and other equipment for the grand opening was a reminder of just how much of an investment it is to open a brick-and-mortar shop. With no budget left to allocate to further expansion, Scott decided to hire people with the right skills to revamp the site's capabilities internally rather than working with outside vendors. "We believed strongly that digital commerce was going to make up a large part of our future, so we decided to develop our own site," she said.

Even though Barrydowne's new website accounts for less than 1 percent of the company's total sales, Scott believes the additional work and investment in new talent have been worthwhile. "We think of our online store as another location for our business, except instead of being on a specific street, this one is in everyone's pocket on their smartphone, on their tablet at home, on their desktop at work. And we treat it just like another store, merchandising it daily with new content and staffing it with our team via live chat."

Social media has also played a huge part in the success of the revamped site. "If we make a post to social media about a specific product, we can see the online traffic and then watch as sales for that specific product spike over the next days," Scott said. "The



opt to have it delivered directly to a jobsite for greater efficiency. Do-it-yourself customers can get leads on new sales via live chat. The store also generates awareness of its new online business through in-store signage and stickers on top of paint cans.

So how does the store's online clientele differ from in-store shoppers? This insight wasn't immediately apparent, but Scott and her team reached out to their first 100 customers to learn more about them. "More than half of the customers were new to our brand, which was really exciting," Scott said. "Overwhelmingly, they were habitual online shoppers, and most were between the ages of 35 and 45, and owned their own homes, a really important target for us at the moment."

Even though the Barrydowne team is grateful for making the leap into the digital age, they still experience the same issues as any independent retailer without an online presence: time, money and manpower. "Most days it feels like we're triaging—putting out fires or jumping in to save the project or customer that is deemed critical," Scott said. "With so much going on, it can be easy to ignore your digital assets and online presence. But if you think of every new site

lion's share of revenue will occur at the store level, but the customers making those buying decisions are influenced by digital touchpoints."

Most of Barrydowne's daily online orders come from contractors who schedule product pickup in advance or

visitor as an opportunity, it is easier to make it a priority."

An easy way to capitalize on new visitors is through social media. "More than 50 percent of time spent on a smartphone is spent on a social network, and we need to be where our customers are," Scott said. "It gives us the upper hand over big-name brands because it lets us share our story, and there is an appetite among customers for authenticity at the moment. Social media lets us capitalize on that."

Maintaining that authenticity and raising engagement means shunning advertising, as well as avoiding looking too polished, a delicate dance that is easy to master once you get the hang of it. While social media novices might think the quickest route to online success is generating a huge amount of followers quickly, that's not the case. Scott recommends connecting with every customer who visits your site and addressing their needs. "Users will engage with your social feeds if



Kelly Scott of Barrydowne Paint

they know you will engage back. Our goal is to respond to a like or a user's engagement within five minutes, so they are still on the platform when they get the notification that our brand responded."

If that sounds like a lot of work, it is. To avoid burnout, the Barrydowne team follows "a pattern of being 'on' and then 'off,' in that we will blitz social media for a week to two weeks and then go dark," Scott said. "The reasoning is that in order to do it well, you need to be online regularly to respond to any and all engagement from your audience."

While some ALLPRO members might worry that building an online presence will detract from retail sales, individual shops aren't in any danger of becoming obsolete. "We are learning that many customers like to research products or companies online but still prefer to visit the store," Scott said. That's comforting news to home renovators who like to see their purchases before buying them and those who still want advice from real people instead of virtual ones. ●



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