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# RemodelingOnline

## Clients Only

A client-only section on your Web site can improve communication with clients, staff, and subcontractors.

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By **Loring Leifer**


Imagine a world where you can set up private showrooms for your clients online; no client ever disputes who ordered what; a change order takes three minutes to put in place instead of three days; and you have more time to manage construction instead of conversations.

You can accomplish all this and more with a client-only section on your Web site, allowing you to handle a range of business tasks online. In password-protected areas, clients access project photos, schedules, budgets, contracts, punch lists, document libraries, and invoices, and sign off on change orders ... for starters.





Few remodelers have taken advantage of this capability. A recent survey in *REMODELING* showed that 56% of readers have a company Web site. Of these, less than 5% offer client-only pages, estimates Michael Menn, a principal with Design Construction Concepts (D+CC) in Northbrook, Ill.

This is likely to change, especially for high-end remodelers. Most of their clients are used to doing business online with their stockbrokers, bankers, and insurers.

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“In the upscale market, your clients have higher expectations,” says John Jantsch, marketing coach and author of *Duct Tape Marketing: The World's Most Practical Small Business Marketing Guide*.

With today's more affordable Web-based applications, you can quickly get your site up and running. And client-only sites are still rare enough among remodelers that you can use them to differentiate yourself from the pack. All who have them — even those who only post jobsite pictures there — extol the benefits.

Those with more ambitious offerings have seen greater gains. Bakken Building and Remodeling in Big River, Minn., for example, put its entire remodeling process online — from construction drawings to online virtual showrooms — and gained not only more streamlined operations, but more time.

## **REVIEWING REACTIONS**

Early convert D+CC launched a client-only feature eight years ago. During a brainstorming session at a peer review meeting, a remodeler mentioned taking pictures every week and e-mailing them to clients.

Menn liked the idea but wanted to post photos online. D+CC, a design/build company, works with many clients who do not live on site during project construction; many move to second homes or rent another house. The principals spent a lot of time on security issues, making sure the client-only section had multiple layers of password protection. They worked with a vendor and spent about \$5,000 to launch the site.

Nervously, they allowed two clients to log on and test the feature. “How is this working out? Do you feel secure?” Menn asked after two months. “Oh, we're so excited that we've given our passwords to all our friends,” one client replied.

“Everything we thought was important went out the window,” Menn says. “We learned that people are proud of their remodeling. They want their friends to see it. The moral of the story is: You need a little protection, but it's not the driving force.”

The company began adding other elements to its Web site's client-only area. The section, called “In Progress,” now offers design and construction contracts, drawings, and change orders. “It's something we use to market our company,” Menn says. “Over the last eight years, about a third of clients are sold because of this.”

## **SITE COMMANDER**

Jim Scovell and John Wolfe, co-owners of Scovell Wolfe & Associates in Kansas City, Mo., are two of the latest to digitize the remodeling experience. They bought a domain name eight years ago, but, “as many small companies do, we found ourselves working continually in the company instead of on it,” Scovell says.

They recently launched a Web site with a section where clients can view their contracts, bid proposals, job-cost sheets, change orders, allowances, and invoices. They can view before, during, and after photographs. The site even features a dummy account so potential customers can get an idea of how it works.

The site is modeled after principles of online banking, where customers do everything online that they can do in person. The owners used Get Online Chicago to develop the site for about \$9,000, plus a yearly retainer for hosting.

Many of the company's clients are couples who both work or who leave for winters or summers. "We wanted to give them access to their projects from anywhere in the world," Wolfe says.

Many people don't keep good files on remodeling projects. "Where's that file? Where's that contract? I lost the invoice, could you send another?" they ask.

"The site is protection for us and offers convenience for clients," Scovell says. "If there's ever a dispute, we have a record. We have our entire remodeling process available at the click of a mouse."

## **DESIGN SAFEGUARDS**

You don't have to offer a smorgasbord of features to benefit from client-only pages. Custom Design & Construction in Los Angeles is a design/build company that does projects throughout the greater metropolitan area. It launched a password-protected site in 2003 to allow clients to review design drawings without coming to the office — and to protect its intellectual property.

The company prefers to have clients meet at their office for the first few meetings, which are crucial and involve major changes; but for smaller changes during the process, clients can access the drawings on the company's Web site. Clients receive an initial e-mail that explains how to access the site. Subsequent e-mails from the clients about design changes are saved on the company's server for future reference.

The company converts AutoCAD drawings into PDF files online. Clients can't print, edit, or forward the files.

Biz-comm, in Fairview, N.C., set up the site and continues to host it.

"[The client-only site] makes the process run smoother and move along quicker," says Samantha Bede, Custom Design & Construction's head of design and sales. "About 90% of our clients use the site. They appreciate not having to drive through L.A. traffic to our office."

An unexpected benefit is being able to iron out more details during the design phase. "Before, clients had to come into the office and make decisions on the spot," Bede says.

“Now, they can consider the drawings at their leisure.” That translates to fewer second thoughts and changes during construction.

Not all remodelers have been so fortunate. With a vacation-home market where most clients live more than two hours away, Tice Construction in Spooner, Wis., was an ideal candidate to do business online.

Six years ago, president and owner Craig Tice hired a Web designer to build a site and spent about \$35,000. The designer went out of business before getting to the client-only portion.

“It was a grand idea,” Tice says ruefully, noting that he plans to try again.

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### **Are You Ready?**

Before spending time and money to create a client-only site, marketing coach and author John Jantsch suggests answering these questions:

- Do you have a good business reason for launching it? Your objective should determine how sophisticated your private site needs to be. For example, do your clients want to be able to follow the entire project remotely or do they just want to see progress photos?
  - How technically proficient are your clients? Are they used to doing business on the Web? As a rule, you shouldn't invest resources in features clients won't use.
  - How can you avoid reinventing the wheel? Hire an outside vendor to develop and host your site. But be sure to thoroughly check out candidates before hiring; those with custom software on their server will have a harder time keeping up with changes in technology.
  - Have you ironed out how files from different programs will interface? Will you convert all files to PDF (portable document format) or will you keep them in their original form? Will clients be viewing CAD drawings online?
  - Who will have access to the site? Will you let all your employees and subcontractors have access?
  - Who will be responsible for keeping the site updated? A full-featured site that never gets updated is of no value.
  - Some companies designate one or two employees who act as screeners to minimize sending the wrong message to clients. Will all the people who will have site access be trained on how to use it?
  - How will you use this client-only site to market your business? Will it be a key selling point? If so, make sure you can demonstrate the site to prospects. Also, you can use the site to measure customer satisfaction by posting surveys at the end of a job.
- Consolidate to Conquer**

In 2004, Bakken Building and Remodeling in Big Lake, Minn., launched one of the most robust client-only sites in the industry. All contracts, schedules, financials, and paper

related to a project are online. Clients can issue a digital signature to authorize change orders online. The company even posts possible paint colors, door pulls, and cabinet styles online in what have become mini-showrooms. Any changes made to a client's site automatically generate an e-mail to all involved.

“It gives us one place for everything to be housed,” says project manager Troy Braiedy. Bakken Building and Remodeling used a product called Icon from ForeCom Systems, which hosts the site for a fee of \$200 per job. The site streamlines communications between clients and the project managers, salespeople, employees, and subs involved in each project. Everyone, including subcontractors, can access the pages. What used to take days can be done in minutes.

“A lot of people are on the Internet every day anyway,” Braiedy says. “Our aim was to free up time spent on the phone and make the remodeling process more efficient.”

The biggest challenge was putting all the material online and getting the system to make sure it was updated, but Braiedy says the effort was worth it. He has cut the time he spends on the phone by 50% and has fewer problems caused by miscommunication.