

# Business

## Communicating With Customers Through the Web

by Nick Turner

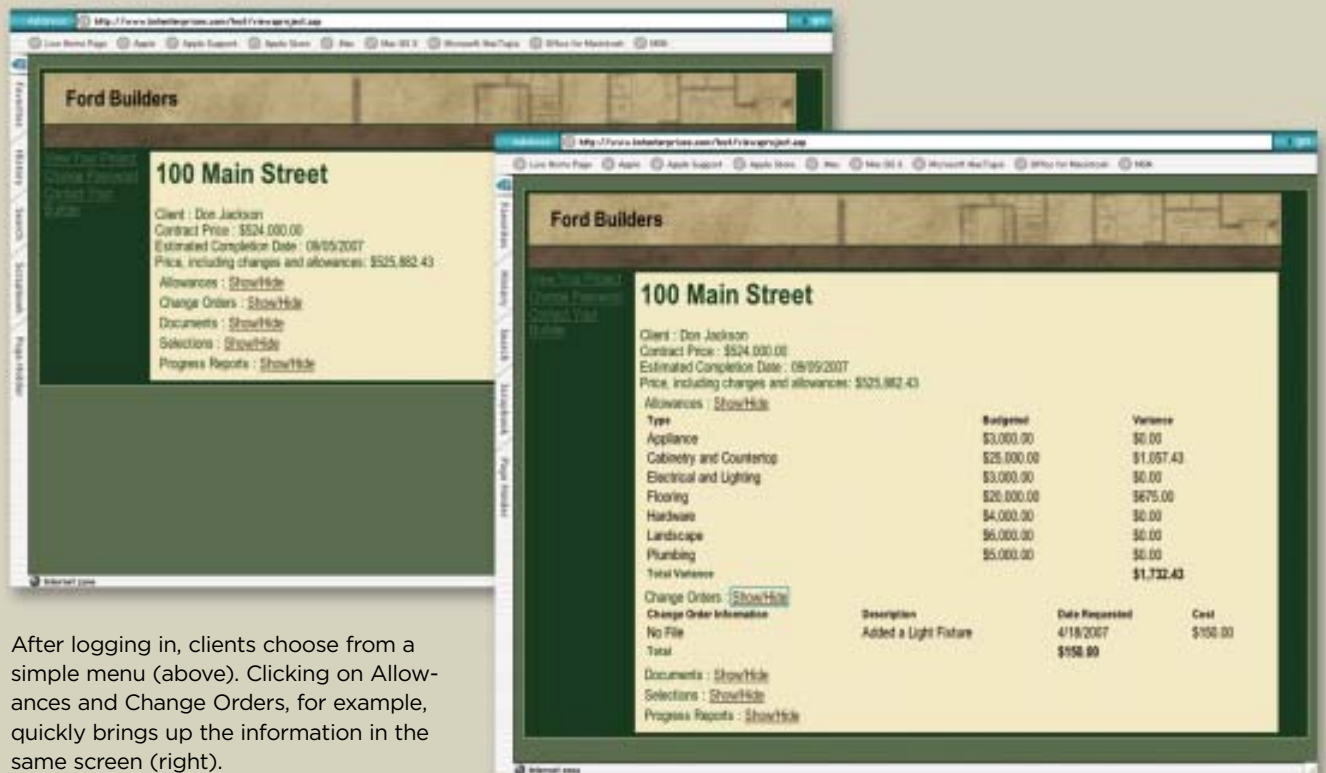
Most conflicts between a service business and its customers can be avoided with good communication. This is especially true for custom builders like my company; on a typical new home, product selections and change orders number in the hundreds. Because many of our clients live far away, the question for us has always been how to stay in touch with homeowners who may visit the job site only three or four times during the life of the project.

I wish we'd had a good answer to this question when we first entered the high-end custom market. Clients would often come to the site weeks after completion of a phase only to discover that a change order had been missed or the wrong product installed. Naturally, these episodes left the clients unhappy, and hurt our referral business.

For the solution, we turned to our Web site. We'd already been using the Web as a marketing tool, to provide information to future clients. The next step was to develop a site that our current clients could use to check on their project. Now that it's up and running, here's how it works.

### Simple Site Works Best

All clients have a personal login page where they can link to information about their house. After logging in, they're presented with several selections. Under Documents, we post the contract, specifications, plans, and any other paperwork that could be considered contractual. Often there are also soils reports, structural analyses, and architectural review board approvals and comments. This information is static, so



After logging in, clients choose from a simple menu (above). Clicking on Allowances and Change Orders, for example, quickly brings up the information in the same screen (right).



it requires only a quick upload at the beginning of the project.

The Allowance section, as any custom builder knows, is far from static, and it requires periodic updating as allowances are nailed down or change orders are written. The links to Change Orders and Selections provide in-depth information on both.

## Product Selections

Depending on the complexity of the job, we may have a dozen or more allowances. This means not only that the customers have to make product selections, but that we have to ensure that products and fixtures have been properly ordered, and delivery and installation scheduled.

To do this, we list the selection and the clients' deadline for making it. Once the selection is made, we remove the date, indi-

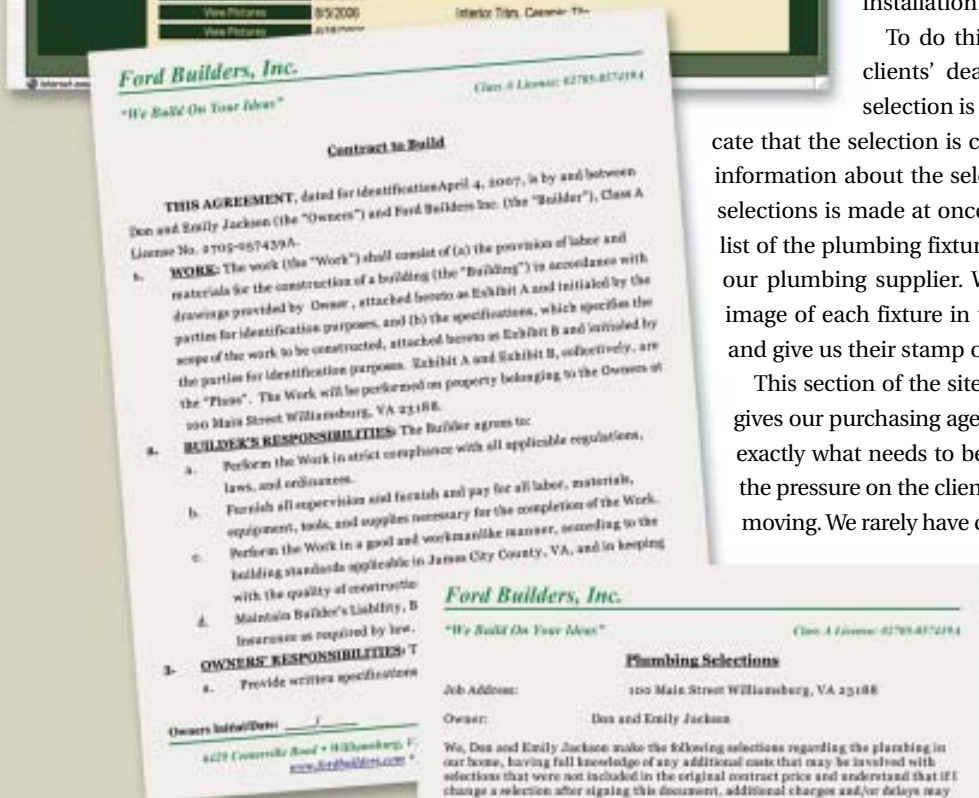
cate that the selection is completed, and provide a link to information about the selected product. Often a group of selections is made at once. So, for example, we may get a list of the plumbing fixtures the clients have chosen from our plumbing supplier. We then simply post a scanned image of each fixture in the list. The clients view the list and give us their stamp of approval.

This section of the site helps in two important ways. It gives our purchasing agent a centralized place to find out exactly what needs to be ordered when. It also keeps up the pressure on the clients to keep their selection process moving. We rarely have clients who want to be the reason

that their project is delayed. Giving them a due date for product selections and posting that constant reminder on the Web site provides that extra push.

## Progress Report

We post a progress report for every job by 5 p.m. Monday; it includes a synopsis of work completed in the previous week, a schedule of work to be done in the new week, a photo update,



Clicking on Document or Selections brings up links to separate Word documents, including the job contract and lists of product selections the clients must make. A due date for final selections reminds clients that meeting the job schedule depends on their participation.

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and reminders of any outstanding items. These progress reports have unexpectedly become a vital part of our business. In addition to ensuring a happy, involved client, they light a fire under us. Do we really want to post the same pic-

tures or the same schedule of work to be done for three weeks straight?

Wanting to show our clients that we're making constant progress on their projects pushes us and drives our schedule.

## In the Future

Many of our clients are eager to share their Web page with friends and family, but they don't want everyone to see what they're spending. So our next refinement will be to add a separate login to access cost information. This will maintain privacy and at the same time allow potential clients to hear about us.

We're also considering installing Webcams at our projects to provide streaming video to the Web site. But that may be asking for trouble.

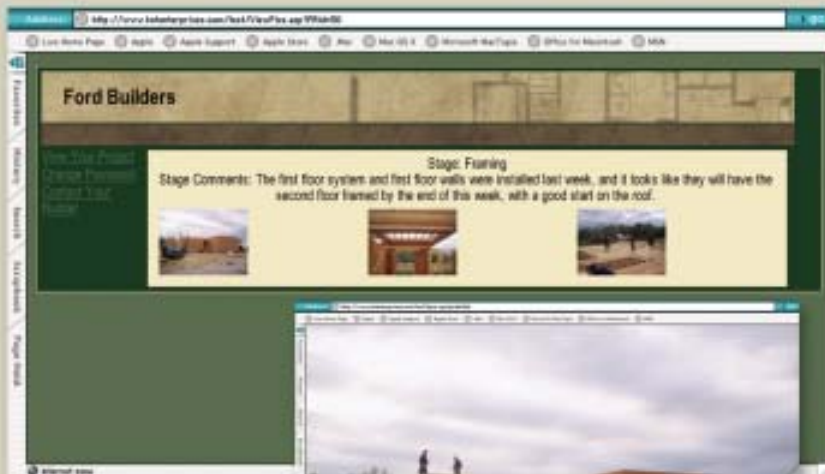
## Setting Up a Site

We were fortunate enough to have a computer-savvy employee on staff to set up our site. We used an off-the-shelf program, Microsoft FrontPage, to do most of the actual Web-page work; it makes creating a site fairly simple, though you might need to hire an expert for some of the trickier aspects — creating the client login, for example.

Most of the maintenance is easy for anyone used to using a computer and the Internet. Now that our site is in place, maintaining it takes two to three hours a week; that includes visiting the job sites, taking the pictures, and uploading the information. Of course, the hours vary according to the number of projects you work on; we build six to eight homes per year.

Given the time we save, our site has been well worth the effort. Plus, I no longer receive those client phone calls at 10:30 at night asking me, "What bathtub did we select again?" or "Did you receive the selections for our wall colors?" The answers to those questions are posted in one convenient place, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

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Without traveling, out-of-town clients can view their job's progress at various stages, from framing to completion.

