

"The printed materials are meant for when salespeople call on prospective clients so that they have something to hand to them and leave behind," she said, adding that the distributor stocks only a minimum of these printed pieces. "They're almost printed on demand; the online versions are easily updated when the company adds and subtracts product lines."

In an effort to streamline its online catalog, Springfield Electric has recently joined the ElectricSmarts Syndicated Content Network (electric-smarts.com), which connects manufacturers, distributors, and contractors with updates on product and industry news, as well as training resources.

"We have been integral in working with them because I feel that this is going to be a huge resource," Nation said. "Systems like ElectricSmarts or direct links to vendor catalogs are probably best because then we don't have to worry about maintaining product updates."

Springfield also publishes a monthly e-newsletter through the email marketing firm Constant Contact (constantcontact.com). "Through Constant Contact, we can track who is opening the newsletter and what they are looking at. We use it as a guideline for future communications."

As video becomes an increasingly popular communication vehicle, Nation

has begun to experiment with YouTube. She noted that she is presently using this channel for internal promotions, which she then sends out via Constant Contact e-blasts. The response she has so far received internally has encouraged her to take it to the next step.

"We are considering doing this for some upcoming customer promotions," she said. "Right now, we are experimenting with its functionality and how much bandwidth it takes, and I believe that it's something that we will be addressing more often in the future." ■

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Q+A

A conversation with **Joe Lardieri** of **Thomas Industrial Network**. by *Jim Romeo*

NEW STRATEGIES FOR GROWING SALES

For the past two years, Thomas Industrial Network has monitored the growth of industrial companies through ThomasNet's Industry Market Barometer (IMB), a survey of buyers and sellers of industrial products and services. In the survey, respondents are asked about their companies' growth and outlook, along with the strategies they're using to overcome challenges and maintain their momentum. The survey also looks at respondents' investments and hiring plans. The 3,370 respondents to the latest IMB are business owners and managers, sales and marketing executives, and engineers and purchasing agents from across North America; the majority are small companies.

Q: What challenges did these distributors and manufacturers report? What strategies were they following to overcome them?

A: The top challenges reported were customers cutting back or going out of business and increased competition, both at home and abroad. In response, they were focusing on client service/retention, competing more aggressively in their core markets, and developing new/innovative products and services. It was clear from the responses that companies were relying on their websites and a strong Internet marketing strategy to maximize the results of their efforts. Three-quarters of our respondents reported that their websites made a contribution to their growth.

Q: What do your findings about Internet marketing mean to industrial and electrical distributors?

A: The data from our latest IMB showed how important a well-thought-out Internet strategy has become to distributors' bottom

lines. For instance, nine out of 10 companies that grew and were expecting future growth said that their websites had helped them to increase revenues, open new sources of business, compete more aggressively in core markets, and serve customers better and more efficiently.

Q: Looking forward to 2012, what should industrial and electrical distributors be most concerned about? What can they do to sustain growth?

A: Companies should remember that when it comes to sales and service, information is power. In today's marketplace, prospects are too busy to call or email for more information. This is especially true when pages of search results that include information about you and your competitors are merely a click away. Think of it this way: A website is the first company representative that a prospect deals with. Like a good salesperson, websites should anticipate and answer a prospect's questions and move them to contact you. Make the most of it; after all, you only have one chance to make a first impression.

Also, go social. Distributors should not only develop a website that sells, but also exploit the power of the social media. By participating in relevant online conversations, wherever they are, distributors improve their chances of being in front of the right prospects at the time that they're most likely to make a purchase. ■

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