



# MARKETING ANSWERS WITH JOHN ROOKS

A SPECIAL SERIES FROM **NELMA**

— BY JEFF EASTERLING

**EVER WONDER** how wood is marketed to interest customers before they purchase from you? Between hard-working wood associations and various commodity branding programs, there's a lot of information about wood in the marketplace. Let's take a closer look through Q&A with someone who has been promoting the use of real, natural, sustainable wood for almost two decades.

**Name:** John Rooks

**Title:** Founder, Director of Human and Cultural Insights, The SOAP Group

## Who are you, and what do you/your company do?

I am a business consultant focused primarily on marketing and sustainability strategies with solid experience in the built environment sector since 1995. My company, The SOAP Group, works with companies to understand their place in the market and, to a broader extent, in culture at large. We perform research and stakeholder (customers, supply chains, employees) engagement, as well as develop creative marketing campaigns based on these insights. We are a pioneer in Remote Ethnographic Measurement (REM), which provides deep insight into customer attitudes, beliefs, and decision-making behavior.

## What are 3 marketing challenges you see in today's lumber industry?

**1. Noise.** Understanding, controlling and breaking through all the influences on consumer decision-making is hard. From retailer recommendations to contractor loyalty programs from manufacturers to influencers on social

media, consumers are bombarded by a lot of noise coming at them from different angles.

**2. Commodification.** More and more competitive products are turning once-specialty products into commodities. How you distinguish your product from the rest can be a challenge.

**3. The Reality of Virtual.** The experience that the modern (younger) consumer has with a brand no longer happens in a physical showroom. It starts, and in many cases ends, online. The good news is that this creates a treasure trove of data to better understand and sell to consumers—if managed correctly. Does your company have a digital showroom experience? Is it customized to the individual customer? The tools exist to create an online experience based on the data trail left by consumers as they wind their way to a decision point. For bedrock industries steeped in a tradition of brochures and product samples, this is a whole new way of thinking about their relationship with consumers. The newness can be uncomfortable.

## What's one thing retailers should keep in mind when working with customers?

Consumers use a hodgepodge of digital and social media channels as a new kind of project management tool for building improvements. They use these new tools to get inspiration for their projects (Instagram); they use it to curate and share ideas with contractors, designers and architects (Pinterest); they use it to find product and contractor recommendations

(Google Yelp), and they use it to manage budgets, documents and ideas within their own circle of influencers and decision-makers (Google Drive).

## Any tips to share for effective communications with customers?

Get found but be patient. Consumers like to discover something. Show up in places that they are and inspire them—get them excited. Think of modern marketing as an attention (not sales) funnel. At the start, we want to inspire and capture attention. Next, show variety in our products. From there, we can get into technical features and benefits. Eventually, you move them into the sales process, but starting that too soon can backfire.

## What trends in lumber marketing are you seeing?

With fluctuations in lumber prices, consumers are starting to reprioritize features and benefits when it comes to selecting products for their projects. Brand loyalty is one of those features. Brand loyalty isn't dead, but it is dying. They're dropping some product features as "must haves" and relegating them to "nice to haves." It's blasphemy to say, but your brand could be losing value as a differentiator. The new strategic advantage is understanding consumer behavior better—and then customizing their experience to reflect the customer back to themselves. Part of your branding strategy should be a mirror in which consumers see themselves. There is a bright spot: our research shows that consumers trust local retailer advice over big box recommendations. Find a way to use this to your advantage! **BP**