

ThomasNet offers a website, to help suppliers and others in the manufacturing industry source raw materials, such as metals, as well as different components, equipment, and maintenance, repair and operations products. The company also works directly with suppliers, product and custom manufacturers, distributors and service providers to develop Internet strategies with services such as content-rich websites with online catalogs, CAD models and project portfolios. Emailing marketing campaigns and social media strategies also make up a large part of its offerings. Social media in particular requires “constant feeding,” says Paranicas. The process includes goal setting, writing unique content for each company, including blogs and posting to LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+, and Facebook etc. “[Many of our customers] want to be engaged in a meaningful way, wherever their prospects are,” Paranicas says. “Other manufacturers are coming to us for the first time because they don’t have the expertise or resources to develop and execute an effective social media strategy on a consistent basis.” Paranicas uses an example of a current customer, Continental Steel and Tube Co., Fort Lauderdale, Fla., that needed a social media strategy. The company sells steel, titanium and aluminum products for aerospace manufacturers, automakers, defense contractors and other markets. “About 95 percent of their business comes from a website ThomasNet developed for them,” Paranicas says. “As new generations of their prospects and customers engage with suppliers through social media, Continental needs to be there as well. Now the company has

a unified brand presence on the Web and through social media, too.”

Fasse agrees focusing on social media is inevitable. Social media and other forms of online communication have become an essential part of managing customer relationships. “For many customers, it has become an expectation that your website will not only provide ample information but also the ability to carry out transactions.

“Social media holds the potential of not only providing the catalyst to keep customers returning to your website, but another opportunity to penetrate the barriers that today’s technologies afford purchase managers and decision-makers,” Fasse continues. The opportunities to cement relationships with lunches, dinners, trips to the golf course or even a phone call, for that matter, are becoming much more difficult to obtain. Companies that are creative enough to leverage social media as another tool to build customer relationships will be the winners. Properly executed, social media could be the entry that paves the way for a phone call or personal visit.” **MM**

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