

HOUZZ Hunting



A Pinterest for the professional set, Houzz.com has independent retailers guessing. Is it a genuine opportunity to make better business connections, or is it just another well-designed waste of time?

By Julianne Will

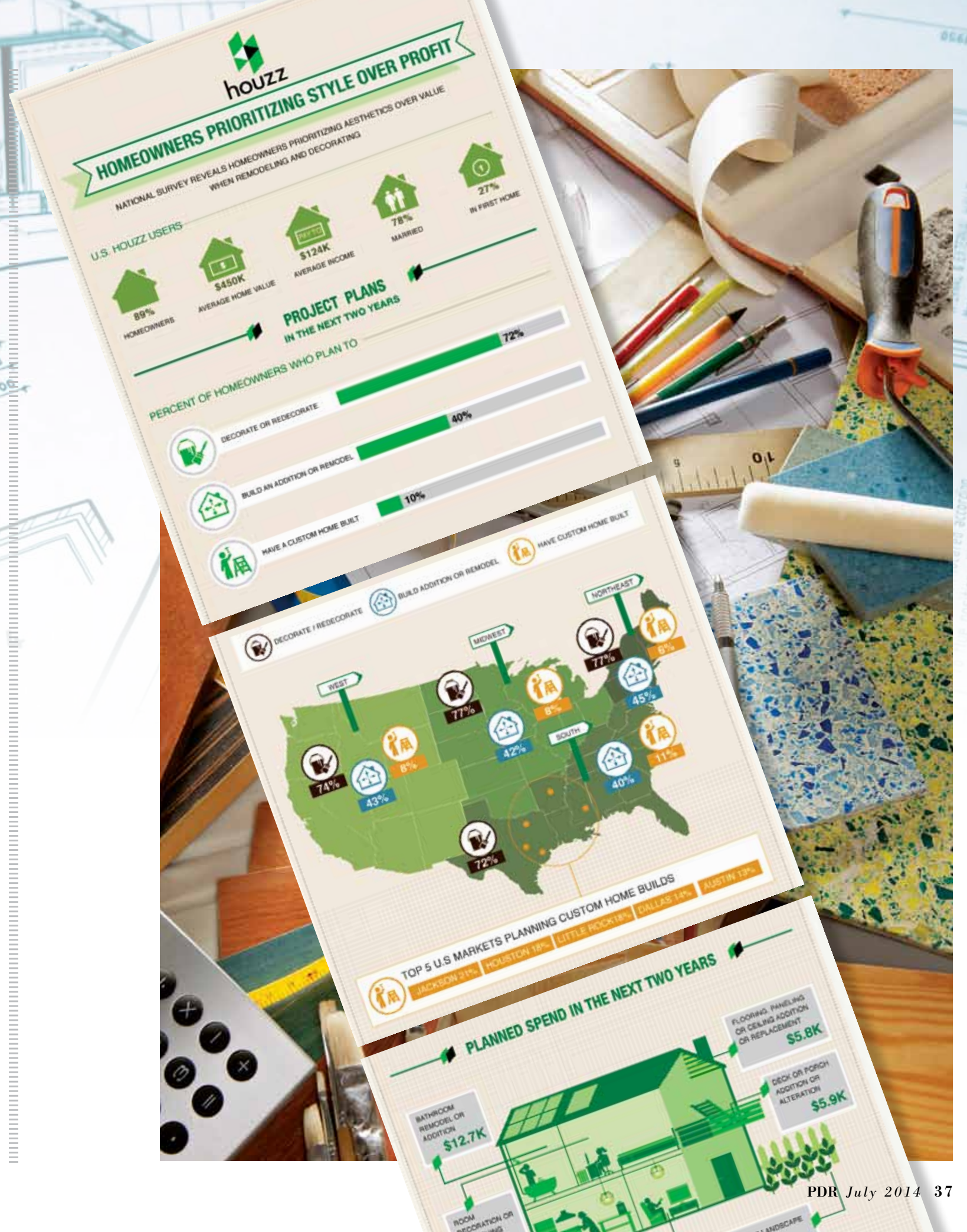
Who knew houses could have hips? Not I. Not until I was building a home and my builder asked about hips versus gables in the roof line. I didn't know I had a preference, either, until I looked at my "Exteriors" Ideabook on Houzz and realized that nearly everything I had saved had at least some gables.

Getting past the terminology barrier is just one of the many benefits that Houzz, a home remodeling and design website and online community, has offered to professionals and consumers alike since it was founded

in 2009. No wonder it's grown to more than 16 million monthly unique users—90 percent of whom are homeowners—in such a short time.

Houzz is populated with beautiful photos from interior designers, contractors, landscapers, lighting stores, furniture outlets and, yes, paint and decorating retailers; in short, professionals representing all the facets of renovating, remodeling, redesigning and building. To date they've uploaded more than 3 million images.

Consumers are searching through those photos to create Ideabooks for their own home projects. It's a little bit like Pinterest...with some key differences.



• **There's no DIY.** Images show finished interiors and exteriors completed by one or more professionals.

• **It's strictly about the home.** Forget recipes and wedding dresses—if it's not a space inside or outside of a living space, or a product related to home building or design, it's not on here.

• **Images are high-quality.** Or at least they should be. More on this later.

• **Users are serious.** Eighty-four percent plan to decorate or redecorate within the next two years, according to the 2013 Houzz and Home Survey of Users.

• **Users can contact you.** Every photo links to the profiles of the professionals involved. And that's the name of the game, right? Leads!

home location and so on—as much detail as possible.)

• Have reviews from clients and colleagues. (It's as easy as asking.)

The initial setup is the most time-consuming effort; afterward, you can expect to spend about an hour or less each week maintaining your profile and engaging with users. Schedule it like a weekly meeting to make sure it doesn't get lost in the shuffle.

Another way to be front and center: Participate in the site's advice section. Look for questions from users that fall within your field of expertise and provide as much of an answer as you feel comfortable giving without a personal paid consultation. You can sort by region to answer questions only from people

High-quality photos may be another investment for your business. Hopefully you're already taking high-resolution, portfolio-quality photos of your best projects, but if not, consider hiring a photography student in your region or going in with other professionals on the project to hire a photographer.

For many professionals, investing time and resources into Houzz has been worth the effort. Rebecca Dumas, owner and color consultant at Gregory's Paint & Flooring in Johns Creek, Georgia, and a PDRA board member, said her free profile has resulted in real live business.

"I have several clients who reached out to me through things they saw on my Houzz profile," she said. "I have secured color consultation appointments locally, and I get inquiries about

Al Hamed Jr. is vice president of sales and development for Hamed Homes, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, a custom home builder established in 1978 by A. F. Hamed. He recently added Houzz to the company's toolbox for this reason.

"In addition to providing prospective clients with a snapshot of our previous design detail and quality components, Houzz also affords our current clients with a wealth of designs and ideas, not subjective to any specific style," said Hamed. "This allows us to collaborate in great detail with our clients [and gain] a better understanding of their needs and wants, and ultimately [helps us] surpass their expectations and ensure we integrate each of [their desired elements] into the layout of their new home."

Houzz has proved to be highly advantageous for Hamed.



Getting started on Houzz is free for professionals. It's as easy as going to houzz.com/GetStartedProf and completing a profile.

The investment comes in the form of time. More than 300,000 professionals are behind those 3 million photos. To rise to the top of that deep pool, you need to be an active user. Houzz uses an algorithm to decide which photos come up first when a user searches. That algorithm rewards professionals who...

• Thoroughly complete their profiles. (A profile completion widget—similar to what LinkedIn uses—will guide you along.)

• Load many photos.

• Load high-quality photos.

• Load photos frequently.

• Add lots of keywords to those photos. (Identify the design style, the products, the part of the home being featured, the

near your business, but keep in mind that many people will see your answer. Even if the person who asked the question isn't from your part of the country, chances are good that someone who does live nearby will see your helpful response. A bonus: Your answers become a part of your Houzz profile, fleshing it out further.

In fact, being helpful is one of the Houzz team's key recommendations for professionals. The site's users are seeking professionals to hire, and they want to see—from the reviews on your profile and from your responses on the site—that you are a good person to work with. Each of your photos will include a space for user comments and questions. If you upload fabulous photos (and we know you will!), users will ask lots of questions, which will be emailed to you. Be sure to respond to each query.

wallpapers that I have on my wallpaper page from all over the United States."

Houzz helps turn those leads into clients. "The site lends credibility to your abilities when you have a good number of reviews and feedback," said Dumas. She regularly asks clients to post comments.

Not only does Houzz bring new clients to your doorstep—ones who are already familiar with your work and style—but it can also help you communicate with current clients.

Houzz users can allow others access to their Ideabooks, meaning you can see exactly what a client is looking at even when you're not in the same room. If you're struggling over how to explain a concept, or you and your client seem to be on different pages, sometimes a picture really is worth a thousand words.

"While many conversations still [begin] with our clients bringing us design concepts sketched on a napkin or scrap paper, Houzz is a great tool that allows us to [show] our clients relative design comparisons. [This is] beneficial when bringing the designs of their dream home to fruition," he said.

As Houzz has grown, so have its offerings. There are Houzz apps for your phone and iPad. Professionals can sign up for Houzz Site Designer, a free service that makes it easy to set up a business website. A boon for small businesses without the budget for a custom site, it's connected to the professional's Houzz profile, which allows one to easily pull in the images, reviews and other information from an existing profile. Go to houzz.com/SiteDesignerSignup.

If you already have a website, you can download a Houzz

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badge to place on your site, similar to the familiar Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest badges. You can also download a widget that will place a slideshow of your Houzz photos on your website.

Houzz creates its own editorial content, generating magazine-style articles that appear on Houzz and populate sites such as *Forbes.com*. Houzz uses the photos uploaded by professionals to illustrate those stories, making your images a launching point for PR opportunities. If you believe you have a truly spectacular photo that would be perfectly paired with a story, you can submit it to the Houzz editors at edit@houzz.com.

If you want to do more with Houzz and you're willing to pay, the Pro+ program gives professionals additional visibility

in their local area. Paid users also have access to a dashboard showing how their photos are doing on the site, with real-time data about the number of photo impressions, the number of clicks, click-through rates and add rates (i.e., how many people have saved a photo to their Ideabook).

Another key to success on Houzz is sharing your presence there with potential clients who are not on Houzz. Place signage in your store; add your profile's URL to your business cards and email signature line; post it on your social media sites; list it in your advertising; and, of course, use the badge on your website. Repurpose your Houzz advice for your social sites, your newsletter and your blog. Use the images in your advertising, on your website and on social media. Get as much mileage out of your Houzz efforts as possible.

Many of your clients are on Houzz, and if they're not, you want them to be. The professionals I've been working with to build a home have found it helpful to have visual references for the preferences that I'm trying to communicate. My roof line has the perfect balance of hips and gables—just like I had seen on Houzz.

In fact, my Houzz is full of Ideabooks, including images of wall colors, stains and window treatments. I've used them to make decisions on brands, finishes and styles. I've even discovered local vendors and professionals for some of my choices. Houzz has opened the door to those relationships. ●

Julianne Will is a marketing consultant specializing in social media. A former advertising executive, she has crafted and managed social media plans for a wide range of businesses and business owners, including retailers.

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