

THE TECH ADVANTAGE

Technology can improve many facets of your garden center and help reach your customers in new and engaging ways.

By Ken Klopp

Technology is changing the world around us at an alarming rate. Companies who embrace technology like Airbnb and Netflix are thriving. Other companies like Panera Bread and McDonald's are improving their relevance with technology. And companies like Amazon are in a league of their own revolutionizing the entire customer experience. If you haven't seen the Amazon Go concept store then I encourage you to Google it. It's amazing.

The reality is technology is here to stay and is part of our everyday life. Companies who haven't embraced it have either lost market share, their leadership position or in some cases gone bankrupt. Blockbuster, Borders, Blackberry and Kodak are a few examples.

So what can we do at the garden center level to attract consumers, be relevant and improve revenue?

Before we dive into options, we should think about who our customers are. They range in age from millennials to baby boomers. Reaching Gen X and millennials is key to our success as they grow to have more purchasing power than baby boomers. Their experience with gardening ranges from novice to garden gurus (heavy emphasis on novice).

They garden because they have a yard or want to grow their own food, not because they eat, sleep and think about gardening. So implementing shopping tools that provide quick results, are easy to use and affirm their decisions are key.

Let's also visit the top challenges garden center owners say they face. We can bundle the majority of their concerns into three categories: 1) Labor issues 2) Rising overhead costs 3) Competition.

If we look at the customers' needs and the garden center owners' needs, we will agree adopting technology alleviates some of these issues, makes a better shopping experience for the customer and improves the goals and objectives of a garden center: happy repeat customers, differentiation and increased revenue. A true win-win.

What portion of your business presence can technology improve? Let's take a look at a few key areas.

On the Web

It shouldn't have to be said, but if you don't have a website for your business, you are losing customers. Searching the web isn't just for Gen X and millennials but is also frequently done by baby boomers. What if you do have a website; is that good enough?

If your website has not been freshened up in the past two to four years, it is time to take inventory:

- Is your website intuitive and user friendly?
- Is your website ranking well on search engines?
- Is your website in line with your current brand?
- Is it responsive — is it easily viewed and used on desktop computers, tablets and phones?

If you aren't sure how you're doing or answered no to any of these questions, you should consider getting your site updated. Even though a website is not the complete picture of who your business is, it is the first impression a large number of potential customers see. There are also some great features you can add to your website to make it relevant to today's consumer.

In Their Pocket

There are some interesting apps on the market that seem to do well on a national scale but, when contemplating an app for a garden center, I would tread lightly.

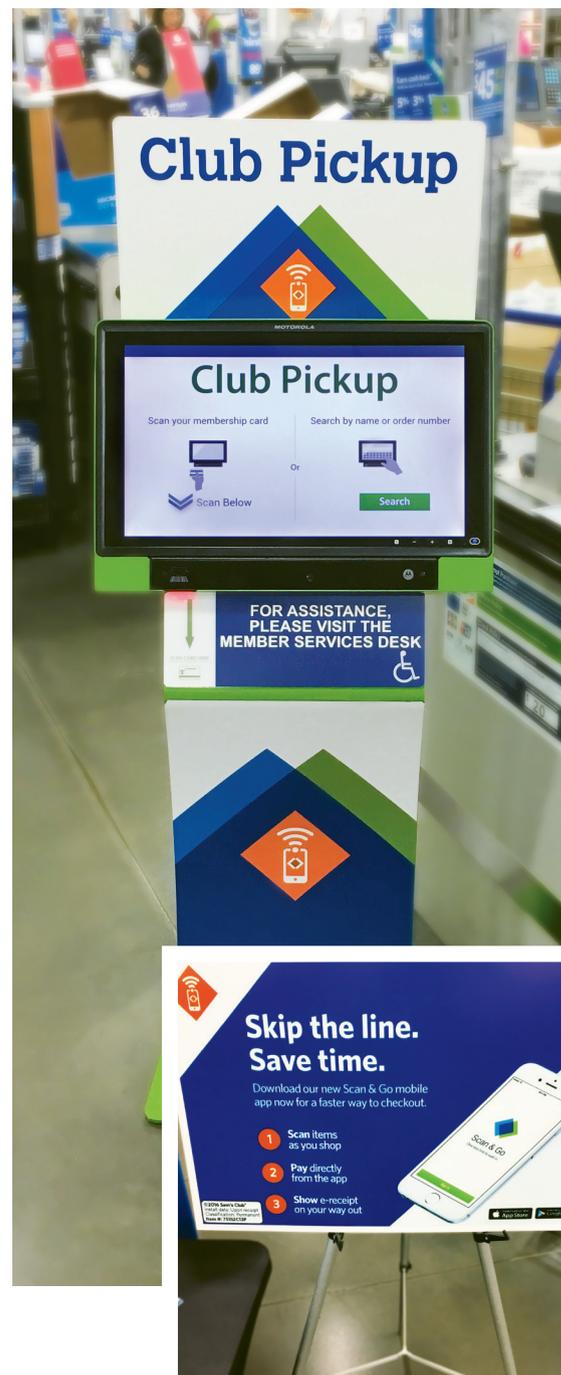
A recent industry article discussed this very topic and said the adoption rate of a garden center app was limited. Growing app users beyond the initial adopters has proven difficult.

I've heard this from a number of garden centers across the U.S., but that doesn't mean an app isn't for you. It comes down to knowing who your target audience is and whether they will respond well to having your store's app.

If it is the first thing they delete when storage on their phone is full, then investing in an app is not a wise decision.

Socially

Almost everyone is on social media, including grandma. So it only makes sense to go where your customers are. Social media can have a bad name because some businesses use the platform poorly by posting or sharing information that is either not



relevant, or they post too often and it becomes background noise to their audience.

The key is finding the sweet spot on postings that are timely, accurate and relevant to your

A KIOSK OPTION



The Perfect Plant is an interactive kiosk for the garden center that puts your information at your customers' fingertips. It is specific for a store and region and boasts features such as "The Plant Finder," "The Weed Finder" and "The Bug Finder."

As customers enter criteria, the list of matching plants the garden center carries is updated, and they can print or email the recommendations on the spot.

"The Perfect Plant is an effective and efficient way for our employees to assist customers in person and over the phone. It is also perfect for the customer who may just want to browse through the pictures to find the right plant for that perfect spot," says Amy Draiss of Dayton Nurseries, Ohio. "The kiosk also provides increased sales as it suggests add-on products, such as fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides, for every plant, weed and insect listed."

The Perfect Plant is the product of Marketing Garden that also provides website design/build and social media marketing to the gardening industry. Marketing Garden can be reached at www.themarketinggarden.com and 888.857.5268.



customers. By correctly utilizing the various social media platforms, you can:

- Increase brand recognition and loyalty
- Increase opportunities to make new customers
- Increase conversion rates of those customers.

The benefits are huge because of the social aspect. Social media is the "water-cooler" of this generation but instead of two or three people gathered around, there are hundreds or thousands.

In the Store

Garden centers across the U.S. are implementing technology at their stores by means of kiosks (see sidebar). Whether it is to help the customer, help the business or a combination thereof, garden centers see the benefit.

Jesse Eastman, owner of Fort Collins Nursery in Colorado, is an early adopter of this technology and says having a kiosk "frees our salespeople up to help more customers, is easy to use and is a reliable resource for customers who prefer to go it alone."

Other garden centers, like Laurel Oak in New Jersey, say it makes their store relevant to what the customer experience is like in other retail channels. They also see it as a benefit to breaking down barriers with infrequent gardeners and increasing sales.

Whether it is to help employees better serve customers, improve labor efficiencies or help customers navigate gardening questions during the peak season, self-help kiosks can help customers quickly find what they are looking for at your store and increase sales.

They can be customized to your store and are easy to setup. Having a kiosk(s) available to help your customers cannot only be effective but second nature to people who already use them elsewhere.

Tying It Together with a Common Voice

However your garden center is represented through technology, it should be with common branding and a common voice. This can seem

overwhelming and cause you to think additional work is piled onto existing staff who are already stretched thin.

If you're going to stand out to the consumer and vie for their business than this is mission critical. Short of hiring an in-house web designer, backend developer and a social media guru, I'm here to say you may want to think outside the box when adopting technology.

My dad has said on a number of occasions, "Half of being smart is knowing what you're dumb at." Besides being a cute one liner, what does that mean? Leverage. Leverage the talents and abilities of businesses that can help you be more successful.

Making your business relevant to today's customer can be handled more quickly and actually save you money when you look at leveraging the strengths of those who do this on a daily basis. Those people are smart at what they do. Leveraging their abilities into your business allows you to focus on what you are good at, avoid a multitude of costly mistakes and take advantage of people who know the latest trends in user experience.

It is extremely important to bring technology into your garden center to be relevant to the present day consumer; I can't emphasize this enough. If we don't listen to them than our fate will be similar to that of other businesses who refused to listen to their customers.

Who wants history to repeat itself? We sure don't when it comes to our industry or the family business. Our story should be much different. It should be a story of how we implemented technology to help our customers see how easy it is to garden; and to help us do a better job of serving them. We want to say we are an industry that is alive and well, bringing smiles and joy to anyone who wants to get their hands dirty. It's really that simple. That's what technology is all about. **L&GR**

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