

Top 10 CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELLING ONLINE



Poking your head in the sand like an ostrich is not a worthy business strategy.

By Steve Maddox

While I was at MANTS in January, a garden center owner asked me, “Is this e-comm thing going to be big someday?” This left me completely speechless. Whether you believe it’s a fit for your company or not, selling plants online is happening. It’s happening BIG, and it’s happening today.

In my role with Bower & Branch, I spend my day talking to garden center retailers helping them understand e-commerce.

More specifically, we discuss how they can increase their company revenues by having a strategic engagement position for online sales and new customer acquisitions, not simply settling for a minor sales shift by putting gift cards online.

Here are some of the most asked questions or concerns.

1 People in my town won’t pay that much for plants.

Green industry retailers are afraid to charge more. Whether it’s modesty, scar tissue from the last recession, or something else entirely, the green industry undervalues its products and services.

I see sales transactions occur everyday where a current Bower & Branch member assumed the same thing, but the consumer acted different and paid a higher price. The key to increasing prices is to do it strategically with a focus on a specific consumer target group.

For the foreseeable future, garden center retailers are going to have to market to new customers online who will pay more, while still serving in-store customers who want a different price. That’s OK.

This is called a “business shift.” Retailers are not going to get everyone to buy plants online, but the ones who do will increase their average transaction size by 50 percent because the consumer will buy the related products and services that go along with the plant.

The increase in revenue comes from the whole package, not just the plant.

2 I want to sell my own inventory.

You should! Having an e-commerce strategy will help. A major thing to keep in mind is many of the people you will be selling to online do not come to your store. Worse yet, they have never even heard of you.

E-commerce introduces NEW customers to your store brand who will transition from “online-only” to “online and in-store” customers who will buy your inventory from both sales channels.

Online sales do not replace your in-store sales. They add to them.

3 What’s my return on investment?

That’s easy — without a go-to-market e-commerce strategy you are going out of business. Next!

4 What if the customer doesn’t like the plant?

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and it’s going to happen. A key part of your e-commerce strategy is to manage against the risk.

Do not use pictures of plants online that are perfect or don’t represent what the consumer is going to receive. DO NOT set your customer up for disappointment. Keep it real. Literally. Use pictures of the average plant and not the perfect one.

5 Will you deliver just one?

Yes, if that’s what the consumer ordered, but it’s my experience they order more than one plant. The garden retail e-commerce strategy has to include an investment in the customer experience that redefines the “journey of the last mile.”

The customer experience our products will be judged against will be the Amazon Plant Store. The “last mile” could even include delivery and installation at the customer’s home. We are seeing an increase in that option as well.

6 How will the customer be successful if I don’t talk to them?

Let the consumer determine how much or how little they want to talk to you.

Today’s consumers are more educated than we give them credit. Basic information can support your e-commerce strategy by making sure USDA plant zones are taken into consideration when deciding your product mix and maintaining “the right plant in the right place” philosophy helps.

For us, there are three BIG ONES. The consumer journey starts when they take the “Find Your Perfect Match” tree quiz, next we turn brown thumbs into green thumbs with a Three Year Guarantee on trees and shrubs, and finally a great network of growers.

7 People won’t buy plants online.

Yes they will, and we see it happen everyday at garden centers across the country.

Did you ever think you would buy food online? Meat, veggies and fruit arriving at your doorstep? Me either, but I do.

Here’s the thing — when you are working with a customer in the nursery they always say, “You pick it out. You’re the expert.” The same thing happens online. They are counting on the expert to pick out their plants.

8 How do I get them to shop online?

This is a foundational part of the strategy. Retailers must consider their e-commerce “site” as a separate location.

Would you open a new store and not market it? People just assume they can put something on their website and Google will automatically find it and make it searchable. NOT TRUE!

There is logic and a science behind making e-commerce successful. It takes a savvy web guru to

understand all the algorithms needed to show up on the first page of a search.

Additionally, companies still need the traditional media used for brick-and-mortar. Social media, emails, direct mail and signage are all necessary to let people know you are open for business and selling online.

Do I need to have a computer in my store for people to buy online?

There are computers in every employee's pocket, every consumer's purse, and every office. The critical aspect of the computer question is, "Where is it located?"

Having a stationary and ever-present location for people to shop your online store is the key. All

companies offering e-commerce increase sales when they include a big screen for everyone to see.

Make it be something. Make it the center of attention. You'll create an audience. You'll create sales.

Remember to be mobile friendly since customers are searching your site while inside your store.



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Do I really need to spend the time writing descriptions?

Yes, yes, and yes! Amazon has reported that merchants who have longer than average descriptions, multiple hi-res photos and supporting bullet points consistently sell more products.

Your strategy is to sell a consumer experience online that involves plants. For example, this is just a snippet of the description of a Slender Silhouette Sweetgum on the Bower & Branch site: "CAUTION: Slender Silhouette Sweetgum is a whiplash-inducing tree. Plant at your own risk! You won't find anything quite like this fun, quirky tree."

Finally, I want to introduce you to a new term: TREE-surance. Look at an e-commerce strategy as "TREE-surance" against a wet, cold, freezing spring.

When the weather is a mess outside, it's always warm and comfortable in your customers' offices or homes. Consumers never have to worry about a bad choice in footwear, stepping in puddles, walking over snow banks or facing cold winds when shopping your online store.

I have been looking outside at 12+ inches of snow all winter while watching online sales add to the bottom-line of our members.

If you are looking to do e-commerce with plants you are not alone; Amazon is too.

It's a scary place when you're not familiar with the space but Amazon is. Make the investment, Amazon is. Just ask Alexa or just Google it. **LGR**

Steve Maddox has more than 25 years experience in the green industry starting in retail, then as a plant broker and now as director of partnership development for Bower & Branch, a network of independent growers and garden retailers that have created an e-commerce brand for consumers who want the convenience of online and mobile shopping. He can be reached at stevem@bowerandbranch.com.

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