



USING *Social Media* EFFECTIVELY DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES

Now more than ever, garden centers must provide frequent, dynamic and reassuring social media content.

By Grace Hensley

With our suddenly enforced social isolation due to COVID-19, social media has become our window to the larger world. Beyond endlessly refreshing the news, or sharing photos of elaborate meals, it's also how we communicate and connect with our customers about the rapidly changing adjustments we make in our businesses.

Right now, our customers are craving both information and entertainment. The most important thing is to be online using the channels your customers use.

Of course you have updated your website with new hours and policies, and emailed your newsletter list with practical tips and encouragement. Now is time to strengthen your social presence.

Whether it is Facebook or Instagram, providing dynamic content daily is imperative to provide reassurance and consistency. Now, more than ever, social media matters

Helpful Social Media Tools

Here are four practical ways to use social media for your business:

1. Communicate: Whatever you do or sell, your top priority is to communicate with your customers and clients. As an independent garden center, you need to communicate changing rules, like reduced business hours, or whether or not you have curbside pickup and delivery.

This works the same if you are a landscaper complying with your state rules, or even a designer announcing new

ways you are connecting with your clients with virtual tours and coaching.

Use the Instagram Grid to post a simple square image. Do not try to get all of the information onto one tiny square, which is impossible to see on a tiny screen; use a graphics program like Canva to design a simple visual like: Your Business Name + Announcements, or take a photo of you cupping your hands around your mouth. Then overlay the date, or "New."

As long as the text is not along the edge of the photo, you can use the same image on Facebook. Then, use the caption or description to outline your updates and new details.

2. Show, Don't Tell: You may need to offer some new products or procedures. If you are a garden center, adapt to the surge in Victory Gardens and offer "Preplanned Veggie Packs" or "Goodie Bags" with designed plant combinations for sun or shade. After all, you are the one who knows what grows best in your climate. Make offerings for four, or 40, or 400 square feet so people who have containers can be just as successful as those with hobby farms.

If you offer landscape or design services, offer virtual design sessions, or reassure your clients that you are only doing essential maintenance activities that maintain the health of their valuable landscapes while complying with state rules.

Reassure them that you are being extra careful with cleanup and social distancing, and ask them to maintain the same standards — that is, that they don't chat you up while

you are working, but you are happy to talk to them prior to each visit over the phone to focus on their needs first.

This is an ideal time to use Instagram Stories to showcase the new Product Packs you offer, or your smiling delivery crew, or your people sanitizing their equipment.

You can also set up a display with “Bonus Offers” showing soil and fertilizer amendments, drip irrigation connections, or a fun time-lapse video of your crew unloading the delivery truck.

Everyone loves a peek behind the scenes, and this allows you to leverage the social media tools best. Reuse these videos on Facebook Stories, or use two cameras to film (Facebook prefers horizontal video), to reach more people.

3. Connect: Remember that people are lonely, confused and worried right now. This is an ideal time to stay the course, and show people what you do and how your business operates. They want to be connected, reassured and entertained. We are in a unique period of experimentation where we can try new techniques and no one cares how professional they look.

Use Instagram Live to collaborate with your clients and offer virtual garden tours of your own backyard. You can talk about the design decisions you make at home and ask them to go live with you to ask their own questions.

You can walk the aisles of your garden center with a client on the split-screen and pick out container plants to order, showing the viewers special features of plants you are selecting. This makes everything interactive and fun, and

reassures people that you know your stuff, so much more so than the big box stores.

4. Teach: If you have a two-person team (or a tripod) have someone hold the camera for you and create a how-to video. Give people projects to do at home ... perhaps using supplies that they can order from you online or by phone, with curbside pickup or delivery.

Save this video to IGTV or YouTube. Make a 15-30 second teaser for your Instagram stories and encourage them to watch more. Share the content to Facebook. You can even hold a “contest” for the best completed project that they can showcase on their Instagram stories with your hashtag.

Remember, stay the course, have fun, and connect. We’re all in this together. 🌸

Grace Hensley is the owner of Fashion Plants LLC, a business strategy and digital marketing company she founded to keep busy while raising two young sons after a career in biotechnology. She is a certified professional horticulturist and continues to work in seasonal container design to remain current with the hot new plants. Plus, she’s addicted to soil. Find her online at www.fashionplants.com.

Editor’s note: Grace Hensley was originally scheduled to address social media techniques for IGCs at Cultivate’20 in July. With the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) situation, please check www.cultivateevent.org for the latest scheduling info on the virtual event.

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