

3 Ways to Enhance Your Digital Presence

The COVID-19 outbreak has created a demand for new digital strategies for IGCs to communicate with their customers.

By Jessica DeGraaf and Meghan Owens

To say that this spring was unusual would be a vast understatement. As most of us were asked (or told) to stay home, our everyday lives transitioned to balancing work, perhaps homeschooling children, and, for many of us, wondering how our businesses and companies would weather this unprecedented storm.

Uncharacteristically spending lots of time in our home offices in mid-March, the Proven Winners team became clear on our goal for this spring: to create tools and resources that made life a little bit easier for our independent garden center partners.

Our early conversations with many IGCs uncovered the varying challenges their businesses would be enduring across North America. Southern IGCs were already well into their season when this shutdown began and were able to continue to serve the many customers who were looking for stay-at-home activities.

Many northern customers were facing some tougher restrictions, and their anxieties were compounded by the fear of the unknown, as it wasn't quite spring yet and it was unclear what May and June would look like for their stores. Many garden centers quickly understood they needed to do things differently to operate under new restrictions and began taking steps to create or improve their online presence.

In response, we crafted an initiative to support these customers with content, resources and tools from both Proven Winners and external sources. Following are three tools that IGCs can use to help enhance their digital strategy now and in the future.

1. Proven Winners IGC Connect Facebook Group

This group is intended to be exclusively for independent garden center owners, employees, and industry professionals who can offer resources and advice. Through this platform we can ensure group members are aware of the content Proven Winners offers and also share information about services and companies who can assist in navigating programs for processes new to their businesses, like e-commerce or online inventory.

Hoping to tap into the wealth of knowledge and experience of industry leaders, we introduced "Ask the Expert." In our first series, Leslie Halleck of Halleck Horticulture filmed short



videos answering a few of the frequent questions being asked by garden centers regarding their social media presence and marketing strategies for 2020.

Most importantly, this Connect group aims to facilitate the sharing of challenges and best practices from our IGC members. This is an open forum where we can all learn from each other. The response to the group has been fantastic. Closing in on 1,000 members, we have been overwhelmed by the conversations, comradery and the willingness of the group members to post their questions, stories and advice regularly.

This group is meant to be a resource, so we encourage independent garden centers to share any information, content or graphics we post on their own platforms. While this group was created as a response to the pandemic, we see enormous value in continuing this community.

2. IGC Connect Google Drive

Because digital efforts were clearly going to be key for many garden centers to connect and service their customers, we recognized a need to get as many assets and tools into their hands quickly and make the process easy. The IGC Connect Google drive (Pwwin.rs/IGCResources) houses downloadable photos of many annuals, perennials, shrubs and recipes, along with an Excel file containing all of our plant descriptions and attributes to help get Proven Winners varieties up on a garden center's website.

There is a suite of new social media graphics, many with inspirational and positive messaging along with graphics to advertise curbside and delivery options. Customers are

welcome to customize these graphics with their logos. Bench cards for all of our varieties are also available on the Google Drive. These are printable and can help answer customer questions on specific varieties especially in situations where staff interaction is limited.

Retailers are encouraged to try out a new resource from Proven Winners, "Plant Your Own Recipe" guides. IGCs can download bench cards for this year's National Recipes or use the template and instructions we provide to create cards for other recipes they are promoting or to use to promote kits they might be creating for easier virtual shopping (pwwin.rs/RecipeCards).

3. Club Sprout

We want to help independent garden centers be a hero to their customers. Our team can definitely empathize with parents and caretakers who are finding themselves at home with the kiddos all day, every day. So maybe out of a bit of self-preservation on our part, Club Sprout from Proven Winners was introduced now!

Kidding aside, our true mission is to help children develop a life-long appreciation of gardening while spending time with their families. We have introduced several educational garden-based activities for elementary school aged children to learn the care involved in planning, nurturing, and enjoying the benefits of gardening and environmental stewardship. Each project includes a PDF handout that can be customized with an IGC's logo and a social media graphic. Some projects are also accompanied by a shareable video.

The program debuted in April, and in an effort to be sensitive to weather limitations and garden center access, we have a mix of activities that can be done indoors and outside with most of the materials being available at garden centers. Striving to present another way for IGCs to reach their customers directly, we are currently only sharing these projects through the Proven Winners IGC Connect Facebook page and Retailing newsletter and all of the assets are housed in the Club Sprout folder on the IGC Connect Google Drive (pwwin.rs/ClubSprout). This is a great opportunity to drive shoppers to their local garden centers by tying these projects to grab and go kits. Look for new projects to be introduced on a weekly basis through the spring and summer.

For many, going to the garden center to pick out plants is a large part of the experience; however, the passion for and benefits of gardening are so great that consumers have been willing to adapt their shopping habits. Kudos to so many garden centers for adapting along with them. We have enjoyed following the tremendous innovation and resilience of the IGC community through social media and shares in the Proven Winners IGC Connect Facebook group. Our hope is that the digital enhancements garden centers made out of necessity in 2020 bring value to their businesses for years to come. 🌸

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