



CLICKS AND BRICKS

Linking e-commerce with your garden center has its challenges. Trees could be an answer.

By Jennifer Hershberger

It started small when we ordered things online that weren't available in stores. A gift that could be shipped directly to your sister, a part for your refrigerator or year-round heartworm medication for your dog.

Amazon made it easy to order books online. And we all know what followed for bookstores.

Soon we were taking chances on cardigans, purses, shoes and (gasp) jeans. This defied all logic; we weren't even able to try them on. But retailers were clever. Their photography got crisper, descriptions more vivid, we could zoom in for texture, and we could lose ourselves in pages of customer reviews.

There was free shipping, even free exchanges and returns in many cases. Then came online ordering with free in-store pickup.

They had us at hello.

A Turning Point

Bloomberg Business reported that online shoppers dominated their brick-and-mortar cousins over Black Friday weekend in 2015. Thanksgiving Day saw \$1.73 billion spent online, a 25 percent gain over last year.

More than 103 million people shopped online over the four-day weekend, according to an annual survey commissioned by the National Retail Federation. That compares with fewer than 102 million who ventured into traditional stores.

Most consumer spending — whether it's groceries or cars — remains solidly at brick-and-

mortar locations. But given the faster growth rates in e-commerce sales, the retail industry appears to be reaching a turning point.

The Wall Street Journal reminded us that it's a rare exception when someone doesn't "relish the joy of grabbing a deal while lounging at home." And who can disagree?

So, the big chains are scrambling to adjust. Beefing up their websites, social interaction, shopping cart experiences, live chat, buy-online/pickup-in-store options, in-store experiences and conveniences and much more.

But independent garden centers have been a bit more resistant as a whole. It's a tall order to create this kind of online and in-store experience for the customer. Besides, let's talk about one department in particular — trees. People want to be outside and wander the aisles, choose the best looking tree of the bunch and plant it right now. Right?

Well, no.

Untraditional Stock

Contrary to conventional wisdom, homeowners do not need to wander the aisles or pick out the perfect tree in person. They can actually do that online with the same, oftentimes better, results when the website is robust — with strong SEO so people can find it — and the trees are, too.

And when you can help someone find the right tree — the precise tree for a homeowner and his/her lifestyle, not a tired alternative that happens

to be in stock — and it arrives fresh from the farm in seven days or less? Well, that's an elegant rebellion to the status quo.

When you partner with a grower who can support you and your customers with exceptional trees, an exceptional online and social experience and even better customer service, that is when you pull away from the pack.

This should come as no surprise to those of us who have purchased furniture. We head to the showroom, sit on some couches in a space designed to mimic the most personal and comfortable areas of our home. We get a feel for the potential this couch has to make our life more functional and beautiful.

And after we've purchased a couch or two, maybe a chair and ottoman or bed for the guestroom, or maybe even sooner, we might feel comfortable enough to hop online and order.

We know the retailer, we trust its style, integrity and craftsmanship. They include photos, measurements and information on warranties and care instructions online and at our fingertips. We hit BUY, then wait for delivery.

This is how we've come to buy our furniture, our cars, our appliances and it's how people all over the country are beginning to buy their trees.

Identity Over Ownership

When everything is changing in the retail space, we have a tendency to cling to what we know. Maybe more of the same — only with added



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Bower & Branch

Bower & Branch was founded by the Eaton family from their 175-acre farm in Leesport, Pennsylvania, in 2014. Don Eaton founded Eaton Farms nearly 30 years earlier with his father. This is when he began researching the market and determined that trees offered the strongest market position, a direction mass merchants weren't equipped to go.

Today, Bower & Branch is the premier e-commerce brand for independent growers and garden centers and a solution to sell more online and in store. Bower & Branch member garden centers learn how to reduce inventory, grow customer count and take back market share from big boxes, not from each other.

With access to the Bower & Branch team, members enjoy high profile and professional online, social and customer service support, as well as access to more than 200 tree varieties via their website that ship to your store in seven days or less. Custom-shot photography is available for all trees and members receive proven plans on merchandising, POP, delivery and planting services, care instructions and an unprecedented three-year warranty, things the mass market cannot deliver.

This is what Bower & Branch founder Don Eaton believes is the driving force behind the company and brand. "We are doing business with truth and grace, uniting independent growers and garden centers around a remarkable product they can believe in and one their customers want. We're helping them deliver on an all-around exceptional experience that others can't match. Trees are for life. So are the kinds of relationships we're building."

You can learn more at
www.bowerandbranch.com
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MARKETING



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persistence and urgency — will turn things around. This is what the best of us tell ourselves in spite of the numbers.

But things are changing. You see it, too.

So instead of seeing this as the end of the independent garden center as we know it, see this as the beginning of a new way to serve customers. Claim your new competitive advantage by giving people more than stuff to own.

Give your customers a way to connect to something or someone else. This is especially powerful with Millennials, who are coming into their prime working and spending years but resonates with every generation disillusioned by the promise that more stuff means more happiness.

"The product or service we deliver can help people do something important ... and this connects people to a sense of empowerment," writes Josh Allan Dykstra in his Buyology series for Fast Company.

Create crystal-clear communication that helps people connect how your product or service makes their lives better.

People buy things because of what they can tell others about it. There's a social piece of owning something that is still very much alive, and always will be. Help connect people to other people through your business. Sales isn't really about 'selling' anymore, it's about building a community.

People buy things because of what having it says about them. Connect people to something bigger than themselves through your product or service."

A Purchase with Purpose

Trees and plants are purchases with purpose. They add value, curb appeal, property value and beauty to our lives and to the lives of those around us. They symbolize sustainability, peace and tranquility.

Trees and plants are not "stuff."

And by blending Millennials' and others' abilities to buy online in the comfort of their own homes while engaging their local independent garden center as a resource, you become the retailer of the future.

What does this mean to business as usual for you?

It means instead of adding rows and rows of expensive inventory at the garden center, trees you must care for and eventually discount at the end of the season, you order some popular and

some eye-catching, exquisite specimens and create intimate displays.

A Living Showroom and Long-Term Relationship

Forget muddy rows of stick figures. Create displays that help customers experience trees in real-life situations, the same way furniture retailers create room displays. Introduce your customers to a shaded, relaxing spot to read, a tree-lined path or a green-screen dining/entertaining area complete with strings of white lights.

Sell them on the outdoor space they've always wanted. The person they will be and the way they will feel in this space. Sell them this and not rows and rows of high-maintenance inventory.

Above all, sell them trees with integrity. This is not about discounting. This is about partnering with a grower who believes in quality, in finding the right tree for every customer and in supporting you in establishing yourself as a tree expert.

This is something the big box stores don't do and aren't equipped to do. Align yourself with someone who will give you the tools you need to generate a higher customer count and better long-term relationships online and in store.

Then be there for your customers as a resource along the way. Be their local connection to the sustainability movement, buying local and contributing to their community. Be there to help them buy the right trees for their spaces and lifestyles. Help them buy, send and/or plant a tribute tree instead of sending flowers for a funeral. Give planting advice, recommend products you use at home, explain your expert delivery and planting services and more. Sell for the future.

As younger generations exercise greater purchasing power, they will use mobile and social to find you and everything they need, including great customer service. Tree and plant experts like you will help them choose trees and products that make them happy now and over time.

This equals more referrals, repeat business and long-term relationships. Online and in store.

Jennifer Hershberger is a freelance writer and strategist based in Indianapolis, Indiana. She specializes in partnering with garden centers and growers around the country. She can be reached at jennifer@jlzcommunications.com or 317.580.0225.

