

This is the third in a three-part series on your garden center's Internet presence. Visit www.lgrmag.com to read the others.

Web 301: Getting the Word Out

Marketing your website will connect you with your current and future customers.

By
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You've got your website designed, built and ready to go. Your web designer has helped you secure a host — or maybe you are technically savvy enough to host your website on your own server — and your domain name, www.MyGardenCenter.com. You have tested and retested your site, found some things you hadn't thought of before, fixed them, checked all the links, made sure all the interactive features work as they're supposed to... All you have left to do is launch your site.

You do. Welcome to the World Wide Web! Now what? How do you get the ocean of Internet surfers to ride the wave over to your website?

Start Local

Have a launch party! Unveil your website right at your garden center. Put an ad in the newspaper announcing that you will unveil your new website on a certain weekend, and invite everybody who reads



that newspaper to attend the event. Make it an open house weekend: food, balloons, the works. Have special sales to help entice people to come. Most importantly, put your website address on everything. Have a little gift, such as packets of seeds printed with your site's address, to give to everyone who comes through the door. If people can buy things on your website, give away "web dollars" or have people earn them in some manner (spend \$20 and earn 1, 5 or 10 web dollars) that can be redeemed online only. Gift cards work, too!

Make sure your web address is now on your business cards. Put flyers in your shopping bags with the URL (and maybe a scratch-and-save discount code to be entered when they check out online), so when the customer takes their purchases home, there's another reminder that they should visit the new website.

Put together some goodie bags for the first 100 to 200 people through the door. Print your web address on some kind of promotional item, such as Post-It notes, maybe a mini watering can or flower pot, sunscreen, bottles of water, chocolate bars, environmental products — whatever will get their attention.

Have a scavenger hunt online: Have people find answers on your website with questions you hand out at the launch party. List the web address on the question sheet so people know where to find those answers! Maybe the first 100 correct entries e-mailed back to you will win something really nice from your garden center. ▶

Partnering: Scratching One Another's Back for a Win-Win-Win Deal

Something to consider when you are building your website is a partnership. Distributors or growers can partner with you to provide accurate content, photographs, inventories, and more about the products they are supplying to your garden center. Partnering with your distributors and growers for additional web content can provide that winning business environment for your company, partners and customers.

A case in point is *Inc.* magazine's 287th fastest-growing business of 2003: Gold Crest Distributing of Mexico, Mo. They began business 11 years ago in founder/owner Mel Toellner's garage, and in 2003 experienced 620 percent growth with a resulting \$6.6 million revenue. Gold Crest Distributing, a provider of backyard nature items from more than 200 vendors, has developed a spreadsheet with a product index of more than 6,500 products indexed in 175 catego-

ries that can be used on their retailers' websites.

"It began with a few requests from retailers asking if they could know more about a product," says Cody Melton, website/data integration manager for Gold Crest. "Our prime directive is to support our independent retailers who want something unique and different, something that Target and Wal-Mart won't have."

The spreadsheet is an Excel file right now, but it is being moved to a database for the purpose of creating seamless integration between Gold Crest's retailers' websites and the product index in the future. That way, when a customer accesses it through the retailer's website, "it will appear that they didn't even leave the retailer's site," Melton says.

Changes and additions are uploaded by file transfer protocol (FTP) every 24 hours. The FTP site has photos, product specifica-

tions and descriptions, and each retailer receives a dedicated link. Retailers can use these photos on their websites, along with any of the specification information found in the spreadsheet.

The company has also just launched a website, www.birdmanmel.com, featuring a series of videos to attract birds to the backyard, also available for retailers' use. According to Melton, "the website is designed to be a spot where retailers can come and learn more about birds" to increase their knowledge and be a resource for their customers. "A lot of our online retailers are featuring one video a month covering one type of bird to keep the customers coming back to their site."

Resources come in a variety of opportunities and from a variety of sources. Taking advantage of available resources will in turn help you become a better resource for your customers.

Expand Your Horizons

As discussed in previous articles, it is also important to reach people who are not in your immediate garden center zone. Even if your primary customer base will always

be local, information is global. People search the Internet for information and resources, even for places to visit while on vacation or a business trip. If your website makes it easy for them to find you

and be of interest to them, you may gain new customers or even potential business partners — distributors and growers, for example — that may have been out of reach without your shiny new website.



Another way to attract customers through the Internet is to submit your URL to the major search engines (most have a link somewhere on their homepages that says “Submit Site”) so their “crawling” systems can begin to add your website’s pages into their vast indices. It’s a bit like a registration: You provide your site’s name, web address and a description that will be used as a summary when your site comes up in search results. Some good, targeted thought should be put into that description; make sure to put that together before you go online to submit your site.

Other Ideas

You can also buy online ads in places such as search engines, on industry magazines’ websites, association websites, and online versions of local newspapers or magazines. Some are quite reasonably priced and, in return, can give you demographic information on who is clicking on your ad. It may show, for example, that your website appeals mostly to 30- to 50-year-old women in your state, and that data can help you target your advertising campaign appropriately. You might choose to gear your message toward other demographics or make better use of this solid customer base. Any advertising you do in trade publications or local publications should now always include your web address.

You also can exchange links with other websites. For example, if you partner with your distributors or growers (see sidebar), you can put links to their sites on your website, and they can do the same for your site on theirs. Not all sites may do this, but it never hurts to ask. You can be listed on association websites as a garden center

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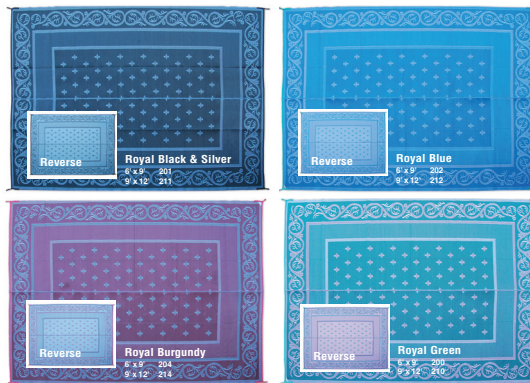
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Some publications offer mailing lists for rent. If you want to reach a targeted audience, you can rent

a list of e-mail or regular mail addresses and send out either an e-mail or a flyer in the mail to the people you are most hoping to reach with information about your garden center and your new website. You can also collect e-mail

addresses at your garden center or have customers enter them on your website if you will be distributing an e-newsletter with garden tips and tricks or even upcoming sales information.

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in Washington, Mo., even sends out freeze alerts to its customers via e-mail. You could also send out news about trees being quarantined in your area because of insect infestation, such as the long-horned beetle problem. There are a variety of situations and subjects that could call for an e-mail newsletter; just make sure someone wants to receive it (opt-in) and that you don't flood them with e-mail once they have agreed to join your list. Always leave them wanting more!

Along with advertising, mailing flyers and sending e-mail, the local press may also have garden sections in their publication, such as the local newspapers, or magazines about the city you live in. If there is a specific garden editor, send them a press release about your new website. A mention in a local garden column can attract lots of new customers.

It's a WWW World Out There!

However you choose to promote your website, if you do it right, it will add to your business and bring new revenue streams and customers to your garden center. You are limited only by your imagination and ingenuity. People appreciate businesses that go the extra mile to make their lives easier or more convenient. You're online now. Let the fun begin!

Cathy Owano is a freelance writer based in the Chicago area and has been creating websites for nearly 10 years. She can be reached at webhead16828@yahoo.com.

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