

This is the first in a five-part series designed to help you take your tech knowledge to the next level — and learn how to incorporate it into better business strategies.

The Write Stuff

By *Christine Lucas*

I am just old enough not to know how to design a web page. To me, code is something in a spy novel. Java is tasty with a little French vanilla. Oh, and if HTML doesn't stand for "How to Make Love," then you can return the book; I won't read it. I am sure many of you feel the same way and would rather be doing something less technical — like, say, gardening. Our earthy passion isn't a refuge from the computer anymore though. In fact, if the popularity of the garden blog is any indication, people must regularly be shaking compost from their keyboards.

Crack a book on web design, and you might feel like you've opened the door to a smoky teachers' lounge. Setting up a blog, on the other hand, feels like prying open a fresh can of Play-Doh. It may not be a masterpiece, but you can make something pretty cool in a jiff. That nearly instant gratification is intoxicating for those with green thumbs and the industry that swirls around them: Every bloom and bug is post-worthy.

Want to entice potential customers with a blog? Focus on sharing, not selling.

Garden blogs used to be things you'd stumble upon while Googling an ex. Now, they're like whiteflies on an orange tree. Seasoned gardeners are typing the intricacies of grafting with blue fertilizer stains still on their fingers. Novices are shouting in all caps about the hanging baskets that they've kept alive all summer. Even

garden centers are getting in on the action and flaunting their wares. They might find it tricky to break into the pack, though.

What's Your Point?

A blog's success depends on the goals of its author. Businesses usually want any venture to lead to dollar signs, and it is certainly understandable in these challenging economic times. But blogs are not about selling — they are about sharing. Increased profits will depend on how well you place yourself in the online community of potential buyers. Thankfully, there are people out there to help us do just that.

"Any business that has a blog has got to be genuine and transparent," says Kathy Purdy, a blog consultant and creator of www.coldclimategardening.com, a blog she maintains from upstate New York. "A lot of people see blogging as a way to market your business without understanding the ambiance of it." Indeed, it is easy for a store blog to turn into a mere sales bulletin when it should be more like coffee talk: "Hybrid tea roses. Discuss."

Purdy says store blogs should strive for an atmosphere that pulls customers behind the scenes. An easy way to do this is to focus on the workers rather than the store as a whole. These are the faces people see when they shop. Customers' trust has ideally already been gained through product recommendations and conversations held while loading merchandise. Customers would much rather be connected with these everyday people, and learn about their daily activities, than with some la-la-la about how mums are buy-five-and-get-one-free.

How do I know? I've made these mistakes with my very own store blog, hesterandzipperer.blogspot.com. I've hovered over a laptop and thought really hard about what new product or nifty deal might get people in the door. Sure, I got some good feedback on my article

Get Blogging!

If you're looking to get started with a blog for your store — or for yourself — these sites offer free accounts, customizable "themes" and even room to post photos:

- Blogger: www.blogger.com
- Wordpress: www.wordpress.com

And here's a recap of the websites listed in this story.

- Cold Climate Gardening: www.coldclimategardening.com
- Rice's Nursery: www.ricesnursery.com
- Botanical blog search: www.botanical.com
- Hester & Zipperer Lawn & Garden: hesterandzipperer.blogspot.com



about beneficial nematodes, but the same people were coming through the store every week. My blog wasn't working.

Thankfully, blogs — like gardens — are not carved in stone. So, I plan to shake things up a bit in this next season. After all, the plant business is juicy. I'm going to let the nursery cats out of the bag this time around, and you can too. If you and your crew unloaded a huge Monrovia truck full of heavy citrus in a down-pour, write about it. Did you all get chigger bites from a trailer of wheat straw? We did. Maybe you broke a water main while setting up the Christmas tree yard (and maybe it wasn't your fault). Write about it anyway. Stories like these are human, and people like hearing about other people.

Are You Missing Out?

Steve Maddox, manager of Rice's Nursery in Canton, Ohio, prefers a web page (www.ricesnursery.com) over a blog, because it requires less of a time commitment. "We promote our website everywhere we can," Maddox says. "All print ads, post cards, newsletters, trucks, business cards, and even

signatures on our e-mails have the website listed." This, of course, is critical, because what good is a site if nobody knows it's there?

When asked whether he feels like he's missing out reaching the younger generations that have

embraced blogs, Maddox points to the group's spending habits: "I'm not counting on huge dollars from those folks," he says. "A lot of them are like me. They've got three kids and a mortgage." Rice's Nursery did attempt to set up a group on

Facebook, but had disappointing results: nobody joined.

Rice's experience online is common, but realize that it is not because people aren't interested. It takes time and determination to develop a following in cyberspace.

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Also note that younger customers with less discretionary income are the seeds of future profits. To disregard their interest in things like blogging, sustainable planting and integrated pest management is like handing them to your competitors on a silver platter.

Get Involved!

To get your name out there, read and post on other garden blogs. If you can't find them, Stuart Robinson is your man. He created www.blotanical.com, a successful blog directory that unites gardeners from around the globe. Visitors to

his site can search garden blogs by continent and state, review them, and submit their own. Robinson can't stress the need for innovation enough.

"Any retailer who believes they can put up a static website and entice customers is in for a rude



shock," Robinson says. "The customer wants to be befriended. They want you to engage them, inspire them and help them be better at what they already enjoy." But here's the catch: "They want you to do it on their turf, not yours."

When your blog is finally out there for all of the world to see, remember that your target audience is much smaller. You are essentially designing a local newspaper, so pack it full of what matters to those who live nearby. List activities of local garden clubs. Post information about school gardens. If your store doesn't carry something, be helpful and tell readers where they *can* find it.

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