

Features

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Advertising's Game Changer

Ann-Marie Vazzano

There's a game-changer emerging on the advertising front. It's not like traditional advertising and it's definitely not about hawking product. It's called content marketing, and when it's done right, it can be a real bottom line booster.

"Content marketing, at its core, is about building customer value outside of the products and services offered," explains Joe Pulizzi, founder of the Content Marketing Institute, which was created to help marketers build audiences through a content-driven approach.

In other words, effective content marketing creates valuable, relevant content to attract an audience, with the end goal of driving sales. It's not a new concept by any stretch (Joe says it's been around for hundreds of years), but it's been gaining ground with the rise of social media and consumers' constant access to information.

"Today, all the barriers to entry are gone. Consumers are in complete control of the information they want and marketers can now reach their audience directly," Joe adds. "We know that valuable, compelling and relevant content on a consistent basis to a very targeted audience works best, but most companies aren't very good at doing this."

But some are. Take, for instance, Maryland-based Homestead Gardens. The garden center's blog serves as a tool to distribute information that its target demographic is likely to find useful. An early-December post, for example, focused on choosing the perfect greenery to decorate your home for Christmas. It included ideas for jazzing up an open stairway by weaving garland throughout the railings and adding a splash of color with gold or red ribbon.

"We don't want it to be all about product, so what we really try to do is make it about giving the reader something that they can then use for themselves," says Rachel Baumgarten, Homestead's brand marketing manager. "Even if they don't use the product, they still have the advice from our team."

Partnering Up

It's definitely a team effort at Homestead Gardens. Last year, the retailer contracted with a content management strategy firm called Brandpoint. Homestead employees brainstormed with Brandpoint's team

about what was trending and subjects they thought would drive traffic to the garden center's website.

"I brought our buyers in and really had them help me direct the conversation on our blog and what really tied into what's going on in the store, what's relevant in gardening, what's relevant in outdoor living," Rachel says.

These content development brainstorming sessions were especially helpful for promoting the garden center's new farm and pet department last year, she adds.

"It's so different from our gardening and outdoor living, but there's a good tie-in. People who are outdoor living enthusiasts or pet enthusiasts are generally people who like to spend time outdoors," she says. "So we really decided to do a push [for the new pet department] on our blog."

This push included a post on how to protect your lawn from doggy destruction, with suggestions for products that can repair grass burn spots, along with instructions on how to use the products properly. Another post focused on purebred dogs vs. mutts and what to consider before getting a new pet. That post ended with a subtle note about the garden center's farm and pet department's ability to help customers determine the diet and nutritional regimen that best fits their pets' needs.

Rachel says determining the ideal workflow between Brandpoint's team and her own was tricky at first, but now that they're several months in, it's getting easier.

"We have a shared spreadsheet," she says. "I share the schedule of what ideas our buyers and I think are relevant, and I provide any resources that I think would help, as well as a list of products that we recommend."

Brandpoint's team writes the posts based on this information and sends them to Rachel for approval. She then shares them with relevant department managers and buyers, who often make suggestions. "It requires some communication between all team members," she says.

Homestead Gardens uses Facebook to drive readers to the blog when there's a new post and much of the store's website traffic can be traced back to the blog.

"Our blog is the main door for outside traffic—organic traffic—to our website," Rachel notes. "It's good in boosting our brand."

Rachel does have some advice for other retailers looking to start content marketing via blog: Don't try to do it alone. "It's nice to have one voice, but if other people can help collaborate with the ideas and finding the content, it makes it easier," she says. "It doesn't have to fall all on one person."

Put A Face To The Name

Gardening and lifestyle expert P. Allen Smith, who spoke about content marketing at Cultivate'14, says humanizing your brand is critical to cultivating an audience and keeping them engaged. That means making employees the center of the content through expert spotlights or "meet the team" posts.

Also, make content development a two-way street. P. Allen suggests tapping your audience for content by

asking them to share their favorite DIY projects from their garden, for example.

Hosting events at your store is another great way to engage your audience, says P. Allen. “Retailers need to make themselves the venue for community activities,” he notes. That includes workshops and seminars on topics that will interest the target audience. Local groups and organizations are often looking for places in their neighborhood to meet, too.

“Make your social media messaging and brick-and-mortar facilities friendly to these groups, offering them an online place to have their conversations and also a place to actually meet,” he says. “This will facilitate building better relationships and help with in-store traffic-building, as well.”

Most important of all, be consistent and have a plan, says Joe back at the Content Marketing Institute. “Brands don’t have to advertise anymore if they don’t want to; they can now reach their audience directly,” he notes. “Advertising will never go away, but more focus needs to be on content marketing than ever before because the consumer is completely in control, and if we aren’t creating information they want or need, we will most likely be ignored.”

The Power of Social Media

Most garden retailers are probably using Facebook and other social media platforms by now, but is it effective? P. Allen Smith shares some tips for making sure your social media efforts pay off:

- Use social media to promote hobbies and customer interests, not always product.
- Inform the public of discounts, discontinuations and/or price changes.
- Announce new products and services.
- Create a two-way conversation through images on Instagram or Pinterest, contests and Q&As.
- Build relationships by introducing your social media/ community manager to your followers so they know they’re talking to a person.
- Make your social media a go-to place for information regarding events planned at your store. **GP**

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