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Ecommerce: Additional Revenue or Extra Headache?

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We've reached the point where some sort of online presence is non-negotiable for businesses. It's how people find you, plain and simple. The Internet can be more than a digital yellow pages ad, though. Have you been thinking about dipping your toe in the world of ecommerce? For many brick-and-mortar garden centers, online sales provide an additional source of income. Deciding to add an additional sales channel is not necessarily a no-brainer, though. Is an online store the key to a river of money flowing into your bank account during the off season or a thicket of thorns best left for someone else to hack through? The short answer is: it depends. Here's the long answer.

Starting with Shipping

Online revenue doesn't have to involve shipping. (More on that in a bit.) If your goal with ecommerce is to expand your reach beyond your immediate geographic location, though, shipping becomes a factor. And when most people think "online shopping" they think "delivery," so any discussion of online revenue has to start with the mechanics of delivery.

Garden Crossings (gardencrossings.com), an online and retail garden center in Zeeland, Michigan, has absolutely perfected the art of shipping. You can order a flat of 20 annuals and it will arrive on your doorstep looking like you just brought it home from the garden center down the street. (I know this because I've done it when I need high numbers of something I can't find locally and I was absolutely floored by the care with which the plants are packed and shipped.)

You can watch a video about their shipping process on their website. For anyone thinking into plant shipping, it's a must-see. You might close the video and say, "Nope! Not gonna do that!" It's an important reality check, though, because, as the Garden Crossings owners said to me, in what is possibly the understatement of the year, "Packaging is important; each company has to figure out what works best for their product line."

Complaints about mail-order nurseries of the past have focused on customer disappointment after paying $25 for a perennial and getting a bareroot stick in the mail. It's easier, but not completely hassle-free, to ship a bareroot plant than it is to ship a big, leafy gallon perennial. To compete in the online marketplace, though, you have to offer something extraordinary, and that means lots of carefully designed packaging enclosing

something your customers can't get from anyone else but you—whether because of quality or convenience or, in the best case scenario, both. Garden Crossings says, "We ship all categories of plants from annuals, perennials, shrubs, herbs, veggies and small trees. All are equally good to ship as long as you take care with packaging."

Extending Your Reach

If running a full-scale operation to ship everything you grow or sell isn't practical for you, there are other options to generate online revenue. Succulent Gardens in Castroville, California (sgplants.com), is a production nursery that grows 700 types of succulents. In addition to a wholesale business, they have an onsite retail shop. For years they've had an online shop as well, but not to sell quart-sized aloes and gallon agaves. The online shop is strictly a place to showcase their cuttings, locally handmade redwood frame planters, living pictures and living wreaths—planted and unplanted—and kits.

It's a "small percentage of our overall business," said Megan Rodkin, nursery owner. "Our living pictures are the most successful, in part because Sunset magazine has a popular article about it on their website. Living Pictures are a nice, niche product that makes a great gift and is easy to ship." She stressed that you "have to have the perfect ecommerce product" for it to make a difference in the bottom line.

"It's almost a different business. You have to spend time driving traffic to the website. You need specialized packaging," Megan says. "We're opting out of shipping large plants and keeping a small segment of our harder-to-find, easier-to-ship items online." Succulent Gardens has a large social media following and stays in frequent contact with far-flung succulent lovers. "Our ecommerce options give a way for someone unable to visit the nursery to be able to participate with us and our activities."

Pre-Orders for Pickup

Debbie Foisy, owner of Debs Greenhouse (debsgreenhouse.com), has managed to find a solution for off-season online revenue without the shipping. Her garden center is located in Alberta, Canada. They open for retail business on March 15 each year, but before that the website is busy accepting orders. She says, "We have found that we get the most custom orders in January. It's ugly cold. Christmas is over and it's just dark, dark, dark."

They offer a variety of hanging baskets, container combinations and custom orders. Debbie honed her offerings and limited the options by selecting specific combinations, since she found most people were going for specific colors anyway.

So what happens to these pre-orders? People come and get them. That's right. No shipping. No packaging—other than fun containers and planters. "It's just easier for people to shop online," Debbie says. "My sister has a new child and she doesn't want to have to go anywhere. This way she can order what she wants from home." She implores people to invest in a professional photographer, noting the best-selling combinations are the ones with the best, most colorful photographs.

Debbie keeps her customers hooked by growing test plants of new varieties that will be released the following year in combinations that she features in her garden center and on social media. (Facebook is best, she says, but Instagram is growing. She doesn't have much luck with Twitter.) People are then excited to log

on and pick out—and importantly—pay for their spring pots when snow is still 2 ft. deep on the ground.

She says, “It’s awesome to have money flowing into the bank during the winter, for sure. What we’ve noticed, too, though, is that by offering these pre-order options we’re getting customers we otherwise wouldn’t. I have people pre-order from a 2.5-hour drive away. That’s amazing. I’m in a rural location. I need people to drive to me.”

It’s possible to have a thriving ecommerce business, whether you ship full-sized plants, offer to mail a finely curated selection of hard-to-find items or drive traffic to a well-crafted, pre-order online catalog for pickup. Only, however, if it fits with your business plan. If you don’t have to deal with packaging, it just might! **GP**

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