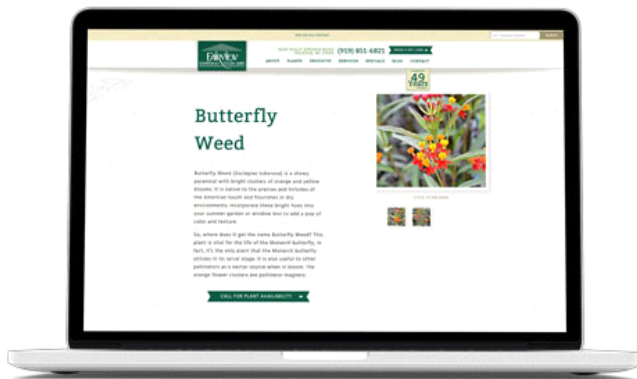


Features

9/1/2023

Embracing the New

Katie Elzer-Peters



This year has been a busy one for tech! From generative AI tools to advancements in mobile POS technology, garden centers are embracing it all. Fresh from the summer trade shows, here's what's trending in tech at retail.

AI Tools to the Rescue

More than one garden center owner, marketing manager or staff member said they've been using ChatGPT and other generative AI tools to make it easier to bang out a first draft of a blog post or spin up a few social media posts from a blog post they've already

written. They all noted that, especially at this point, it's important to have a horticultural expert edit and fact check (yes!) and ensure continuity with brand voice. For garden centers with limited resources and a never-ending list of content to generate, the tools can be lifesavers.

E-commerce Without the Commerce

Having an extra set of hands to create product descriptions (virtual or human) is a must when it comes to the second trend sweeping through garden retail: e-commerce without the commerce.

Visit the website for Fairview Garden Center in Raleigh, North Carolina, to see an excellent example. They have a WordPress website with products (plants) listed and categorized much like an e-comm website, but instead of a button saying, "Buy now," it says, "Call for plant availability" and links to a clickable phone number.

Sam Kirkland from Epicor always says, "Make your products visible on your website." He told this story recently: "Last spring I went to the store for a \$1.99 tomato and spent \$400. I wouldn't have gone in if I didn't know they had that cherry tomato. I didn't want a grape tomato. I wanted a cherry tomato. How'd I know they had it? The website."

This is one way to do it. And, if you use a true e-commerce functionality, you can, essentially, turn products on and off by easily publishing and unpublishing them as they come in and out of season.

Intranet Options Make Management Easier

yourgardencenterspace.com is the new intranet solution for garden centers created by Souny and John Kennedy. Reston Farm Garden Market in Virginia was one of their early adopters and they love it. Co-owner Lowell Weinstein

said the system puts everything in one place and it's easily accessible to staff, including their schedules, employee handbook, training modules, custom order forms, links to health benefits and more.

A recent addition is a chatbot feature to answer staff questions about policies specific to their stores. This AI-powered agent is trained for each customer/garden center and is not customer-facing. What it does do is provide a way for staff to ask questions in a conversational way—to someone other than the owner. Souny said that an attractive feature of the program is that garden centers don't have to pay per user. "That gets expensive for them, fast."

She loves working with their clients to solve problems as they came up. "One garden center asked us to add a project management component. So we built one—yesterday!"

Another key component of the system is its apps to facilitate ordering. The system is connected with OrderEase, which, in turn, allows for easy ordering from distributors, including TDI brands and De Vroomen. A "custom order" form allows for garden center staff to request a special order for customers that routes directly to the garden center's buyer. "We did over \$50K last year with that feature alone," said Lowell.



Online Training is Key for Customer Service

I attended a session co-presented by Jessica DeGraaf (Proven Winners) and Sam Kirkland (Epicor) detailing the options and opportunities of online training in retail garden centers. Whether it's provided through an intranet learning management system (such as Epicor's products or Your Garden Center Space) or via a supplier's website, this type of training is essential for elevating the customer experience and improving sales. Jessica said she's routinely thanked by staff for the training offered by Proven Winners. "It makes them feel more confident on the sales floor."

As part of their talk, Sam and Jessica cited research proving that employees that are offered opportunities to learn are much more likely to stay and/or return season after season, while those thrown out on the floor with no training are more likely to leave.

The important thing is that garden centers don't have to come up with this training on their own and they don't have to get everyone in the same room to watch at the same time now that much of this partner training is available online.

Bonus? Both Proven Winners and The Espoma Company provide extra perks for certified garden centers, including improving their position on "where to buy" lookups on the corporate websites.

Mobile POS Improves Sales

What happens when your sales associate has to leave the sales floor to check on back stock? Sam says, "Lost sales." In our labor-strapped circumstances, any tool that makes any staff more efficient is essential to maintaining and growing the bottom line. A quick answer also improves the customer experience. Ten or 15 years ago, a mobile tool with inventory, plant info and POS capability might have cost \$10K or \$20K per unit. Now they're between \$1K and \$3K per unit and usually available in phone-like or tablet forms.

Think about it: We're so used to looking up external information on our phones while we shop—why should we make our customers go to a desk or wait for us to find that info elsewhere? We can't and they won't.

QR Codes Are Here to Stay

“Are QR codes really being used?” I asked several plant brand managers if they’ve looked at the stats from QR codes printed on tags and pots. “They definitely are,” said Ryan McEnaney, Marketing Manager for Bailey Nurseries. Where are those codes linking? To all kinds of information, including:

- YouTube videos
- Websites with plant information
- Newsletter and SMS marketing sign-up
- Instagram, TikTok or social media platforms

The great thing about QR codes (as long as they’re not used to deliver a menu at a restaurant) is that you can change where they point as the season changes or your needs change.

Venmo-driven Store within a Store

I’ve seen this trend in many non-garden stores. What’s being sold? Plants! From bookstores to apparel boutiques, increasingly there’s a plant corner with a QR code to a Venmo account. Some plant displays are obviously the work of part timers with side gigs, but others are outposts of larger shops. The prices are on the plants and the shopper just remits payment via the Venmo code.

Have you thought about creating a pop-up at a local merchant? It’ll help you sell plants and drive traffic at the same time. Another way to use this trend is to host a local maker pop-up at your store. That’s a way to offer complementary merchandise without the need to track. Of course, agreements need to be in place, and there’s likely to be a little attrition, but it’s relatively low-input marketing.

Does one of these trends look intriguing to you? Give it a try this fall and refine for spring. You might be surprised at how much your business can grow. **GP**



Katie Elzer-Peters is the owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a green-industry digital marketing agency. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com.