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Features

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Retail-Ready & Future Tech

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How are new technology innovations going to impact retail tomorrow, next week, next year, over the next five years? Let me get out my crystal ball! Just kidding. There's enough happening in the wider world of retail to discuss new to new-ish innovations that can make a difference for you now and in the near future, as well as a peek at what's on the horizon.

Setting the Stage

Wait—before we start, let's discuss how to decide which tech to implement. If you've logged in to any sort of SaaS (Software as a Solution) program like MailChimp, or even social media platforms, you're immediately confronted with "use AI to write this!" "See AI search results!" Sometimes the suggestions are out of whack, but they're now in a race to "keep current."

Do your customers want this? Yes and no. They want what makes their shopping experience more fun, more convenient and their outcome more successful. What they don't want is tech for tech's sake. They also don't want to have to create more logins and accounts. That brings us to our first and biggest, most impactful tech innovation that you can implement right now.

Increase Cart Value: Contactless Payment/Digital Wallet

Sure, most online shops accept credit cards and Apple Pay, Shop Pay, Google Wallet, Amazon Pay and PayPal. It's increasingly common for brick-and-mortar retail stores to accept Apple Pay and Shop Pay (if using the Shopify POS). U.S. retailers lag behind other countries in Europe, Australia and Asia, in part because our banks don't push this type of payment. During a recent trip to the Netherlands, I accompanied my friend to the farmers market, where she paid every vendor using her wristwatch.

Because these payment forms are becoming more widely accepted at all sorts of non-garden retail establishments, our customers will expect they can use them at all retail establishments. Here are some stats from a 2023 Forbes Advisor study to encourage you to explore these options:

- 59% of respondents between the ages of 27 and 42, and 50% of respondents between the ages of 43 and 58 use digital wallets more than other forms of payment

- 78% of Gen Z responders, 55% of Millennial responders and 52% of Gen X survey responders reported that they stopped shopping at merchants that only accept cash or credit card payments
- High earners (making between $90,001 and $120,000) reported convenience as the reason they preferred using digital payment methods
- Users pay for items small and large with digital wallets
- 47% of respondents said they spent more when using digital payment forms

This means: when you're shopping for a new POS system, you absolutely must factor in the ability to accept digital wallet payments. Ideally, it'll also support RaaS, or "Rewards as a Service," to track customer loyalty incentives. (Bonus points for a mobile wallet rewards "card.")

Finally, if you offer any kind of e-commerce, you have to offer, at a minimum, Apple Pay and Google Wallet.

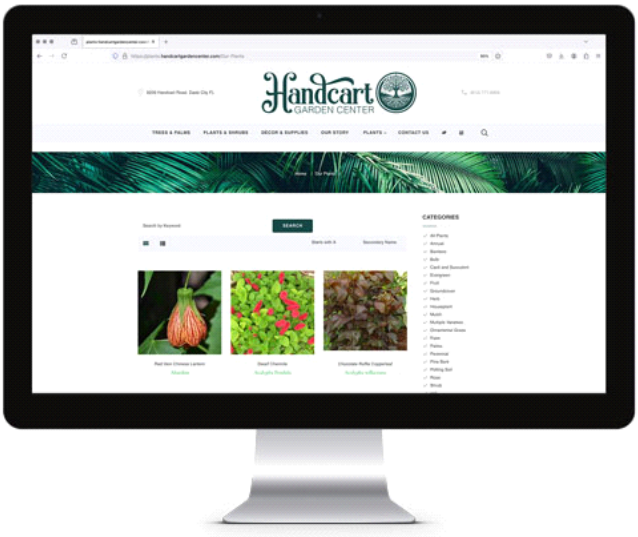
"If anyone tells you offering Apple Pay is too expensive, tell them to get over it," said Erin Weston, owner of Weston Farms, a magnolia farm that ships gorgeous magnolia leaf wreaths across the United States. "Our sales went up substantially once we implemented it. People like to shop from the couch."

Expand the Aisle: Consolidate E-commerce Efforts

Increasingly, consumers are expecting to have the same choices while shopping in store and online. One way to bridge the gap between the 1,000 to 4,000 SKUs in your store and the 20,000-plus SKUs in our common categories is to connect brick-and-mortar stores to drop shipping companies. Shopify has introduced a new sales channel called "Collective," which allows retailers that meet certain requirements to tap into the network of other Shopify merchants and expand product offerings. Drop shipping is most common in the health, beauty, home goods and electronics industries, but around 30% of global e-commerce transactions involve drop shipping. Look for new opportunities on the horizon as large plant drop shippers harness emerging technologies to create opportunities for brick-and-mortar businesses.

What about e-commerce without the commerce?

GardenCenterMarketing.com, a division of Clarity Connect, introduced an "add on" plant library option this summer, which allows garden centers to easily add a link to their website leading to a customized plant library that showcases the plants carried in store. This can be added on a subdomain to any website. Pulling from their library of over 40,000 plants with full descriptions and licensed photos, it's an easy way for IGCs to get products on their websites without the lift of writing plant descriptions and amassing licensed photos, driving more traffic to the store for purchase.



Encourage Repeat Visits: Predictive Analytics

While individually implemented e-commerce solutions are almost out of reach for small retailers, the marketing tech employed by e-comm retailers is firmly within reach. It's time to implement the proven methods they've honed.

Within your POS is a treasure trove of data about your customers. As long as you have their email addresses you

can create marketing campaigns that deliver personalized information relevant to their purchases—taking into account both the timing of the purchases and the items purchased. You can send care instructions and follow-up emails two, four, six or eight weeks later. You can send emails to highlight new or different products that complement previous purchases. You can use that data to say, “Hey we haven’t seen you in a while” and invite people back who haven’t been in. We’ve passed the threshold where this type of personalized communication seems creepy and is, in fact, expected by customers.

Take a Load Off: Find Brand Support

You’re not on your own when it comes to harnessing tech tools. Big plant brands are jumping in to help. Helen Lawson, the Retailer Partnership Marketing Coach for Monrovia, wrote to me about a new delivery notification system they’ve implemented for garden center customers so you’re never caught off guard when it comes to unloading a truck of plants. Bailey Nurseries has assembled a new resource library for retailers.

“We’re always looking for new and innovative ways to support our retailers and help them sell more plants! Increasingly, that includes digital solutions,” said Ryan McEnaney, Marketing and Communications Manager at Bailey Nurseries.

Jessica DeGraff, Director of Retail Accounts for Proven Winners, walked me through some changes they’ve made to their Connect+ program, including making it more of a “mix-and-match” retailer’s choice program. Within the program, at certain tiers, they’ll create and manage Google ad campaigns (passing a small cost to the retailer) to help improve local search rankings. Ongoing, professional support for this type of PPC is out of reach for most small- and medium-sized garden retailers. Much like the drop shipping collectives, by pooling resources, retailers can substantially increase the quality of their initiatives.

Another new part of the PW Connect+ program is the option for participants to utilize ConnectSpace, an IGC-focused, AI-powered intranet solution that allows garden centers to streamline staff communication, gather training resources, access marketing materials and more.

“It’s not just our collateral in this intranet space,” Jessica said. “Many brands have wonderful training programs and we’re happy to make those more accessible to everyone.”

More Tech Trends

These might be a ways off from garden retail, but they’re gaining traction in other verticals, which means we’ll be seeing more options for our industry, soon.

- **Smart shelves:** Shelving that captures and transmits data about which products customers are interacting with and how they’re interacting.
- **Cooling technology:** July 2024 was the hottest month on record. With temps trending up so are the incentives for companies that produce cooling technology, including wearable tech to keep staff healthy.
- **Augmented reality and virtual reality tools:** These tools are gaining steam in the apparel, beauty and design sectors, allowing customers to virtually “try on” clothing and makeup or “try out” furniture in their home before making a purchase.
- **Mobile commerce:** High-end brands have invested in tech that allows customers to self checkout in the brand’s app. Look for this type of option to become available in larger POS systems like Lightspeed and Shopify POS over the next few years. (Both Shopify and Lightspeed already offer embedded payment systems, which means the payment gateway is part of the POS instead of an additional third-party solution.)

It’s enough to make your head spin, isn’t it? As more tech solutions become available, keep in mind that people buy

from people. Always evaluate new options through the lens of “how can this help me give better, more focused and personalized attention to my customers” and you’ll be just fine. **GP**

Disclosure from Katie: I’ve worked with or for, been paid to speak by, served as a reference or a consultant to almost every entity mentioned in this article. As someone working in the tech space of the relatively close-knit horticulture industry, it’s nearly impossible not to cross paths multiple times with almost every brand. I’ve tried my best to cast a wide net when surveying emerging tech options and critically evaluating what to include and what to leave out, with the understanding that there are more on the horizon we can look forward to investigating.

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