greenPROFIT

Tech Connection

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What Got You Here Won’t Get You There

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In November it’s inevitable to reflect on the year (for me, a little strange, how about you?) and plan for next spring. Hopefully, you’re taking time to get ahead. Any work you do now will pay huge dividends come April. As I write this in early October, there’s plenty of uncertainty on many fronts, so how can you plan or get anything ready for April? How do you future-proof when the present is so wild?

From a retail marketing and tech perspective, you can look to trends. Not trends in what people are buying or what colors they’re wearing or “it” plants or popular songs. You can look at trends in how they’re shopping, how they’re getting information, how they’re interacting with those trends and spreading them or shutting them down.

That’s what today’s about: talking tech trends to jump on with a little help from our friends. This summer, Joan Dudney joined our team at The Garden of Words, and shortly after arriving, she spent the day captaining the retailer tour bus for the Farwest show. Along the way, she stopped at Bauman’s Farm & Garden and Al’s Garden & Home, two fantastic garden centers (among more) in the Portland, Oregon, area.

“You MUST talk with them, Katie,” she said. So I did. I took 10 pages of notes, but we don’t have 10 pages of space, so we’ll focus on the tech nuggets.

Fix Potholes on the Information Highway

Brian Bauman, the General Manager for Bauman’s Farm & Garden, said, “When you’re trying to grow a company, what you’ve been doing is not going to keep working. You’re going to have to upgrade things. You must treat your tech like infrastructure.”

Repeat after Brian: You MUST treat your tech like infrastructure.

And much like roads, bridges, electrical lines, water mains and the like, tech needs maintenance, upgrades, improvements and replacements. To do those updates, you’ll need to budget for them. You’ll also need help. It takes more than one person to build a bridge. It’ll take more than one person to upgrade your internet.

Brian said, “Our WiFi was a great example of that. We ordered routers online. They didn’t cut it. We have multiple buildings and needed a strong signal to reach them. When our solution didn’t work we hired a tech company. They had to upgrade everything, configure the boxes and routers, and get us set up with enterprise-grade software.”

Hire a Driver

Unless you're a captain, you don't pilot the cruise ship you're on. You don't let the new seasonal employee plan your spring production schedule. Well, running paid advertising, configuring security software and turning out effective emails are also specialties that can benefit from expert help.

"We pay someone to manage the antiviral software and ransomware. We could not do that in house," he said, adding, "We had to figure out when we should hire someone in house and when to outsource it. My cousin has an email marketing company and is great at it. We send her the content and she manages the list and everything else. She also manages the e-commerce website."

Video is a different story. They still hired an expert, but one that lives in house.

"We started with YouTube five or six years ago. We hired someone whose sole job was to get us started and set up properly. That was huge for us."

For long-term marketing, he says it can take a while to find someone who's the right fit, but that it's a huge part of their marketing and in-house communication. They make videos for their seasonals and frequently upload content for their core customers.

"They sit there drinking their morning coffee and watching our videos."

Head to the Cloud

When I mention trends in information consumption, the one that isn't going away—the one that you can know will be useful, regardless of which way the wind blows come April—is cloud-based activity. Brian concurs. "I'd never go back to non-cloud-based software." In part, it makes it almost impossible to collaborate without cloud-based information.

"We use Google Drive for file storage, we have a cloud-based POS, QuickBooks online for bookkeeping and our staff—including 150 seasonals for our harvest festival—communicate via the Teams app." Training materials are in the cloud, too. "Our orientation packet includes links to YouTube training videos."

Take Over the Airways

Al's has been taking stock of tech trends and capitalizing on them, as well.

"Our marketing approach has changed," said Mark Bigej, COO for Al's Garden & Home. "We're constantly trying to change up our methods. We've gone away from radio and more to local broadcast television and—new to us—connected television advertising."

Connected TV ads are what you see when you watch shows on Hulu, Max, Peacock or other streaming services available on smart TVs and on-demand platforms. They don't have to figure it out by themselves, though.

"We have a local television station that works with digital marketing SEO and the whole thing. They offered us local broadcast ads, connected or both," he said. "What we like about the connected TV option is there are lots of metrics and we can pare down and shape the audience for display to make sure we're reaching the exact people we want."

They know people are seeing it, both from the metrics and from visitor comments.

Check Your Mail

When you get back from your tech trip, make sure to check your mail. Your email, that is. It's still the best channel for Al's. In fact, when they cut back to emailing customers twice per week from three times per week they found that their open and click rate decreased, so they bumped the frequency back up.

"It is our most effective channel that we can manage," Mark said. "We have a garden club, but we've found that

some people who don’t want to sign up for the free garden club will give us their email.”

He said that they work hard to make sure current promotions are listed along with events, but that they also include a blog post or actionable info.

“How did you get to three emails a week?” I asked.

“Initially, that third email was just for our e-commerce customers. Then we decided to send our e-comm emails to everyone,” he answered. “Our open rate didn’t go down, so we stuck with it.”

Data Will Drive the Future

What was very clear to me from talking with Mark and Brian is that data drives their decisions. Their company values might be their north star, but when it comes to putting the pedal to the metal, numbers are the guide. They each said a version of this to me: With these new systems, we have all the data imaginable. It’s time to use it. **GP**

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