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Social Media: You Can Play to Win

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I think I speak for everyone when I say %\$*@! the algorithm. Spend hours making a reel and it gets 100 views. Push out specific information about a weekend event and everyone sees your post ... after the event has happened.

Sure, if you pay to boost a post it might get seen by a few more people, but is the ROI worth it? (And do you want to arbitrarily line the pockets of tech bros? Pardon me, I'm salty.) This begs the question: Do you actually have to keep up with social media? Is it worth your time at all? And, if so, how can you make it suck less and work harder for you?

Yes, you gotta do it. It can be worth your time. And here's how you're gonna make it suck less.

Reality Check

You aren't imagining things: According to the 2025 Instagram Benchmarks study by Social Insider, Instagram engagement decreased 28% YOY between January 2023 and December 2024. Posts are just not reaching as many people.

Maybe you've heard this saying: "If you're not paying for the product, you're the product." That's definitely the case with social media. Our data, our content, our output is the product used to sell advertising, sometimes back to us. Basically, once a platform has captured enough market share, it doesn't have to be good anymore. It just has to be. Everyone's locked in. But that doesn't mean YOU have to spend a bunch of money on it. Here's what to do instead.

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Level 1: Be a Social Media MVP

Not a most valuable player, but a minimum viable product. Social media apps, particularly Facebook and Instagram, serve as quasi extensions of your website. When a customer is thinking of heading over to your business, if they're

a power Instagram or Facebook user, they're going to check your Instagram or Facebook for this important info:

- Actual business name (not just your handle)
- Hours
- Location/address
- Phone number
- Website

You would be amazed at how many local and independent businesses don't put their location or contact information in their social media profiles. HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO COME SPEND MONEY IF I DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?

So the minimum to do on social is keep it updated with your current hours and location and throw an occasional post up each week.

Level 2: Be a Builder

Once you have the basics covered, it's time for you to get something back from what you put into social media. Use your social platforms to build your email list. I sound like a broken record on this matter, but for good reason. I know dozens of local and independent businesses that relied heavily on social media to get the word out to their customers about new plants, events, classes, services and more and, when their Instagram account or Facebook account (or both) got hacked, they were up a creek with no paddle.

Social media is rented land. Your website and your email list are yours. Use what attention you get on social to add to your email list. Create a hosted email sign-up form or add a sign-up form to a specific page on your website and grab the link. Add it to the Instagram profile and post stories with the link sticker leading people to your email sign-up.

How do you entice them? Give your email subscribers something special. First crack at your season opening. Holiday open house just for subscribers. A free plant coupon. During the busy season I'll post four stories per week with an email sign-up link.

Partner with local influencers to share your events, activities and items on social media. This is a newish class of "micro influencer" that focuses on hyperlocal activities. In Wilmington, North Carolina, we have a great account called "Check What's Good" ([instagram.com/checkwhatsgood](https://www.instagram.com/checkwhatsgood)). When they spotlight a business, that business sees real return. Coordinate with your local influencer so that when they're sending people to your account you're pushing hard on email sign-up.

Level 3: Be Connected

Your profile is great. You're building your email list. Now you can connect (we finally got to the connect part of Tech Connection) your email program to Facebook ads, TikTok, Instagram ads and more.

Mailchimp, Constant Contact and Klaviyo all integrate with the major social media platform ad managers.

Use your email lists to create lookalike audiences for advertising on social media so that your ads show to a more targeted audience rather than a random boost. Create an offer (20% off on first visit, free plant, etc.) to drive email sign-ups and deliver that offer while welcoming new subscribers via a welcome sequence. Well-considered social advertising is much more effective than boosted posts and will deliver email subscribers that you can stay in touch

with.

All of the email providers have good articles about how to do this on their platform. They're step-by-step instructions. Assign someone who's not afraid to click around to work on it for you. The best time to do this? Now! The best time to build your email list if you're a garden center is when everyone's thinking about and engaging in gardening. You'll thank yourself come October.

Side Quest: Schedule Ahead

The fun part of social media is how "off the cuff" it can be. The aggravating part of social media is how "off the cuff" it can be. Do yourself a favor and please look into scheduling posts ahead of time. If you're having events, make the graphics or source the photos and schedule a couple to three posts per event leading up to the big days. With just THAT as a pre-scheduled framework you can rest easy that the basics are covered. Schedule directly in Meta Business Suite, create and schedule through Canva, or if you have a lot of individual links to share, schedule through Later.com or another service that offers a "link in bio" option that will lead visitors directly to the event registration associated with the post.

To recap: No you're not hallucinating. Social media reach is dropping, but it's still relevant. There are specific tactics you can use to get more out of the time you spend sharing on social media. And, finally, you can do all this without spending an arm and a leg. It mostly takes a little elbow grease. **GP**

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