

Features

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Adapt or Die: Connect Online Shopping to Your Store

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Think of your online shop like the parking lot of your garden center. Before a customer ever walks through your door, you've made an impression. They've made a judgment.

Most garden center websites are that forgotten parking lot, and they're costing you sales every day, around the clock, whether your physical doors are open or not.

REI is an excellent example of offering expert advice online, as well as allowing for buying online, picking up in-store or shipping-to-home options on the website.

What Your Online Shop Communicates

Before you sell a single plant online, your shop is already talking. A site with stale photos from two springs ago, no way to buy anything and an "Under Construction" page tells customers loud and clear: "We are not ready for you." A clean, current online shop with real products, real prices and a "Buy Online, Pick Up In Store" button tells them the opposite: "We're open for business, we respect your time and we're ready to serve you right now."

Real Service, 24/7/365

Your best customer is probably planning her garden on a Saturday night at 10:00 p.m. She wants to know if you carry deer-resistant salvia, what it costs and whether she can pick it up Sunday morning. Right now, Amazon can answer her. The big box store down the road can answer her. Can you?

Your website must capture customer motivation 24/7 with a click to buy at the product page. That moment of captured motivation is gold—and most garden centers throw it away by not being there for the motivated customer. This is the customer they may have informed and motivated, or another company did. In both cases, the motivation fades to nothing, instead of guaranteeing a customer in the door or attracted through the door who'll buy more when they get there.

Why Connect Online to Your Store?

Treating the website and the store like two separate businesses is a big mistake. They're not. They're one business

with two front doors. When they're truly connected, you can show real-time inventory, offer same-day or delayed pickup. Only one item checked out and paid for online generates customers in the door to buy more.

That one item and a physical store you're already paying for leads to a powerful impulse-buy opportunity delivered straight to your cash register—with no discounts, no coupons, no gimmicks. Why? Because the item they're coming for is “free” in their mind. It just released their mind and wallet to buy more. In fact, that opportunity to buy more is a powerful reason why they bought that one first thing. This is retail magic.

Pre-Orders: Reservations, Not Reactions

Pre-orders aren't just for the big guys. Take orders for spring annuals in January. Take orders for herbs, vegetables and summer annuals while they're waiting to be notified for pick-up of the January orders—after the danger of frost passes and the soil is warmer. Lock in revenue before the season, then know exactly what to grow or buy so nothing wilts in the back corner. Think of it like a restaurant's reservation book—you know who's coming, when and what they want. That's the difference between an experience and a scramble.

Be aware. While many are jumping into pre-orders they see and hear others are doing, most report it's working, but they aren't getting ROE (Return on Effort) and it's causing them to slow down or stop. Selling online in this way is the right path forward, but it requires the correct, very specific set of tactics and execution. Get it right and you win. Do it wrong or ignore it and you might get locked out with your customers already planning to pick up their order and to buy other things at your competitor's store. You'll then be squashed. You'll not only be late to the game—it'll be over.

The REI Lesson

For the gold standard of “omnichannel”—making online and physical work as one—study REI. You can browse their gear online, see which stores stock it, reserve it and pick it up the same day. Their “Expert Advice” section turns employees' real knowledge into web content that guides shoppers at midnight, the same way a green-vest associate guides them in person. Their CEO calls it making retail feel “personalized and emotional.” That's exactly the advantage an independent garden center has over box stores—and too few use it online.

Your Move

Plants are still where horticulture is rooted, but it isn't business as usual. The Adapt or Die perspective is this: Independent garden centers that connect their online and physical experience are the ones who'll be owning their local markets.

Never mind the other garden centers who compete with you directly. Meta, Amazon, big box stores and direct-to-consumer sellers are getting more money from more paychecks of more consumers. This isn't about shipping plants in a box across the country. Your local customers are online right now, spending money you never see for what you don't sell and some of what you do. The only question is whether they can buy those things you already sell from you when and how they want to—or someone who figures this out will serve them first and forever, leaving you in the cold. **GP**

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