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The Art of Building an Online Business

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Let's travel back in time for a moment, shall we, to the year 2000. You may remember such joys as dial-up internet (though broadband was in its infancy), AOL and the controversy over Napster. This is also the year Rod and Heidi Grasman shipped their first plants from online sales.

Rod initially shipped 60 clematis that year for a company called Paradise Gardens, which he grew in the greenhouses behind his parent's house. Then he began to explore the idea of selling plants online a lot more.

"It intrigued me because I was looking for a certain plant at local garden centers and we have quite a few good garden centers here in West Michigan, but I couldn't find it. So I went to a catalog and ordered it that way," he recalled. "And then I'm like, 'We're shipping clematis, why don't we kind of just expand that?'"

They began to look for a location where they could grow plants to sell online and that's when they found what is now Garden Crossings in Zeeland, Michigan. It had been run as a garden center previously and they bought the business in 2004 with the intention of only using the greenhouse space for growing for the online business.

The business model differed from the typical online plant companies at the time, too. They didn't print and mail a catalog, which was the common method at the time. Rod built a website set up for e-commerce and started shipping plants out of the greenhouse in 2005. And that's when locals came knocking, asking if they were going to open up. Initially, the intention was just to grow and ship, but as local demand grew, they decided to open a small garden center portion. Today, the retail side is about 15,000 sq. ft. and the growing side 4.5 acres.

"We've been growing the garden center up front for a number of years now. I like my footprint," Rod said. "But we've always been focused on e-commerce. Even today, our business is probably 75/25."



Most of their offerings, about 80%, are Proven Winners plants, and Rod said this about the selection: “I can guarantee that we carry more Proven Winners varieties than many other online retailers or garden centers in the United States.”

Around 2009, Garden Crossings partnered with the brand to ship annuals, perennials and shrubs that were bought on the Proven Winners Online Store, as well as anything offered on GardenCrossings.com. Now that the partner companies involved in Proven Winners will be a unified company through the partnership with private equity firm Staple Street Capital, that’s going to change starting in 2027.

“We have both decided to move in different directions,” Rod said. “We will still be growing and offering for sale most of the same varieties at the same quality we have shipped in the past, but only through GardenCrossings.com.”

The Logistics of In-Store and Online

Garden Crossings ships to the 48 contiguous states and offers locals the following options: to buy in store, buy online and pick up at the store, or buy online and get it shipped to their house. This offers up some inventory management challenges that are separate from a straight e-commerce business.

For example, if Rod were to just have a garden center, he said he would grow more larger-sized containers or multiple sizes. But shipping larger containers presents a major financial barrier. For example, shrubs and perennials are shipped in quart or 1-gal. containers, while annuals and edibles are shipped in either 4.25-in., 8-in. or quart pots and succulents vary from 3.5-in., 4.25-in. and quart containers.

Another unique concept is locals who either buy in store or buy online and pickup in store have a different link with different pricing than online sales. That’s definitely an incentive for local purchasers and he said they’ve seen 100% growth this year in the online pickup segment. And, essentially, he’s run it as pre-orders where all new products and any existing inventory are online and ready to order starting January 1 with pick-up dates in peak spring.



Rod noted they can order as many times as they want or just continue to build a grocery cart throughout spring and then check out.

“They’re all paid for. And that’s always been what we’ve done, but we’ve just seen a huge increase in the pick-up side of it this year,” he added. What’s nice about that, too, is there’s a bit of psychology behind coming into a store to pick up something you already purchased. It feels “free,” which means shoppers are happy to spend more once in the store. To that end, Rod has seen a definite uptick in the amount spent in store in the spring when customers come in to pick up.

And lest you think they had an advantage during COVID, Rod said they actually learned a lot in streamlining their in-store pickup from the demand during the pandemic. What helps tremendously that they've been doing for a long time is barcoding every plant. Since they grow most of it themselves, this is part of the process, but even if they buy in it's barcoded. That way they know how many Proven Winners Supertunia Vista Bubblegum II Petunias they sell every year, for example. It's that precision that helps with both managing the inventory between online and pick-up sales, and determining what's trending and how much to grow for the next year, reducing shrink. It can also inform their marketing, which we'll talk more about.

The Infrastructure

Garden Crossings started with Clarity Connect for both front end sales and back end inventory management, shipping and office necessities, and it was highly customized to what they needed. Today, they have a blend of Shopify on the front end for e-commerce and Clarity Connect for the back end.



For shipping, they have about 25 years of experimentation in the right way to pack and ship plants. Today, they use compartmentalized recyclable cardboard packaging to reduce waste. They ship everything ground to minimize the shipping costs to customers and ship to all 48 contiguous states.

Online sales are labor intensive and it requires multiple checks to make sure the right product is going to the right place.

"We scan everything multiple times just to verify we're shipping out the right product because the last thing we want is the customer getting the wrong plant," Rod said, noting they pay the shipping cost if they have to re-ship an order.

Rod also has some advice for those looking to start shipping outside their typical sales area: Do your research. There's a lot of regulations and legalities around shipping to other states, particularly surrounding regulated invasive species. It pays to do your due diligence.

The Marketing Behind The Sales

By growing and selling Proven Winners products, they've been able to take advantage of all the advertising and marketing the brand puts behind its plants. That includes having plants in stock when someone like Laura LeBoutillier of Garden Answer mentions it on her socials.

Rod noted, too, that he's been impressed with genetics throughout the industry and they'll be expanding to include more options from a variety of breeders that are solid garden performers, which they've started to incorporate in their large display gardens out in front of the store. Those work both to show local customers how plants perform and also to provide his wife, Heidi, a location to film videos that she posts to the social channels. As a seasoned local influencer, she has a YouTube channel with more than 46,000 subscribers, as well as 94,000 followers on Facebook, 23,000 Instagram followers and nearly 17,000 followers on TikTok.

Garden Crossings does a great job, too, tying together their cohesive messaging between the social channels, the website, email marketing and in store. Heidi has worked hard to build a loyal following who listen to her when she recommends products because she's a real person who talks honestly about the plants.

“On an average, we draw people from over 40 to 50 miles away. We’ll have people every weekend in the store from the five-state area,” Rod said. “And they’re coming just to talk to Heidi because she’s the YouTube influencer for us.” **GP**

Go to the Garden Crossings YouTube page to watch Heidi Grasman’s videos.