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Make Your IGC Approachable to Newbies

Amanda Thomsen



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I think we all know that, from an outsider's position, garden centers are labyrinths of the unknown. Garden centers can be as mysterious as Stonehenge, especially for people accustomed to shopping at big boxes where the store layout is always the same, the inventory varies little from store-to-store and they feel comfortable knowing what to expect. As we know, independent garden centers don't follow the same reasoning, so how can we bring those new customers (of all demographics) and make them feel just as comfortable as an employee who's been working there for three summers? (Okay, okay—no one needs to feel THAT comfortable):

- Create store tours (or even department tours) on social media, often. Using Facebook Live or Instagram Live, do a weekly walk through of what's new and where things are. Make sure you're talking and answering questions

while you're Live. You may want to invest in a GoPro (or a knock off) with a steady handheld mount.

- Make an official tour video or add panoramic photos to your website. Make them feel like they've been there before, when they haven't.
- Get a drone for aerial shots; they're less expensive than you think ...
- The important thing here is to let people know that YOU HAVE WHAT THEY NEED. Even if they don't know what they need.
- Run promotions for regular customers encouraging them to bring in newbies. This could actually be FUN! Add it to a newsletter: "Bring in a friend that's never been in and you BOTH get 10% off your cart!" How do you know if that person has never been in? You're harvesting emails for your mailing list, only new addresses qualify.
- Make it all about children. An adult on their own may not venture into uncharted territory, but we will do all the dumb things in the world for our kids. Character visits, tea parties, bounce houses, special kid-oriented classes and petting zoos all lure in the littles while giving adults a comfortable sample.
- Instagram Stories is better than most hot fudge sundaes, but not all. It took me a long time to embrace it, I didn't understand "throw away" photos for a long time. But here's the deal: If Instagram is where you catalog your Main Event, Instagram Stories is where the Behind the Scenes lives. Fun, quippy, fast and completely non-permanent, I've come to love Instagram Stories because: A) People usually don't comment (and sometimes that's a blessing);

B) When they do it's a private conversation, so there's room for it to be more real and personal; and C) By having yourself registered with Instagram as a business, you get piping hot analytics of who's peeping your short-lived posts that I GUARANTEE is going to make you feel great. PLUS, you're grabbing a way younger, better-looking crowd. (I was just joking about that last part.)

- Sadly, all this might not cut it. We're moving to a market where people want to fill out an online order form and have their purchases delivered without ever even making eye contact (and within the next four hours). I don't blame those people; it sounds tempting even to me. "Here's what I expect and here's when I expect it." If you can do online ordering or really comprehensive inventories online, do it. It eliminates so many questions and phone calls. Sadly, it also eliminates all add-on sales.

It's a crazy time to run a business, but it's even crazier to run a business without using new tools and ways of thinking to further not only your bottom line, but the future of gardening and garden centers (no pressure). **GP**

Amanda Thomsen is now a regular columnist in Green Profit magazine. You can find her funky, punky blog planted at KissMyAster.co and you can follow her on Facebook, Twitter AND Instagram @KissMyAster.