

## Cover Story

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# Operating at Peak Efficiency

*Bill McCurry*

Artificial Intelligence (IA) is changing our world. Large companies use chatbots, inventory decisions, pricing maximizations, voice shopping, etc. What's happening today at the local garden center?

Technological transformations have changed some aspects of our industry, liberating you and your team for more productive tasks.

This checklist with this story shows things, uncommon a decade ago, that garden centers can use today. Identify the ideas that will achieve higher efficiencies in your business. Mark those you should investigate, those you're doing and/or those you have no interest in. Below we'll take a look at some of these concepts as they're being used by vendors and retailers in the industry.

## The Rebel Continues His Rebellion

Jon (J-Dogg) Karsseboom (Garden Corner, Tualatin, Oregon) welcomes Garden Rebels to join his Garden Rebellion. Doing things differently, but having fun, Jon, like many others, is selling from his website for delivery, but mostly for in-store pickup. Where Jon rebels is he offers 24/7 chats on his website. Operating through Facebook Messenger, Jon or his team can identify the person before they respond.

"When you have a chat function on your website, you must be willing to converse with people outside your geographical marketplace. If you don't respond promptly and professionally you could get flamed," he says. "We differ from many retailers; we want to talk to everybody, so we adopt our systems to make us easy to communicate via whatever channel the customers choose ... We encourage texts, email, telephone or Facebook posts—whatever the customer wants.

"As long as the customer is communicating with us, we're here to listen and respond in whatever fashion they prefer."

## Share the Expense/Expertise

Smaller businesses can't afford to compete with IT infrastructure. Costs are excessive compared to sales volume. The current iteration of online horticulture company Bower & Branch brings consumers together with growers for delivery/installation through carefully selected local garden center partners.

Bower & Branch starts with a consumer-focused e-commerce site and ends with delivery/installation by local qualified retailers (delivery from the site is available if no garden centers are nearby). Bower & Branch "leapfrogs" the independent retailer into today's e-commerce world. They allow the retail consumer to effortlessly shop or research via mobile or computer with maximum flexibility. The company has attracted some of our industry's top

talent (Don Eaton, Sid Raisch, Jim Eason, Clint Albin and more) to eventually roll out nationwide.

They let the consumer be reached how, when and where she wants, and the website removes inhibitions about buying green goods. Plant care education and additional items needed are presented in an easy-to-comprehend, light-hearted manner that adds sales volume, while increasing the likelihood of the planting success. The company's "tree-osk" is an in-store kiosk resource where retail customers can access information, explore options and even chat directly with Bower & Branch experts.

## Use Experts—Don't Reinvent the Wheel

Generally, it's easier, quicker and more economical to outsource specialized tasks to specialized individuals/companies. Arett Sales is a well-known major eastern U.S. garden center distributor (delivering to 20 states). Their Greensmith division provides marketing support services for growth-oriented companies.

Being a "full service agency," can use a variety of marketing media and technology for retailers' customer acquisition and retention. Retailers who need help establishing a web or social media presence or are too busy to manage it can delegate it to Greensmith. They know how to write, so customers will buy, while limiting technical terms and cementing customer relationships. The location of your marketing support isn't critical. What's important is that your expert help has the systems and expertise to make you effective at a cost you can afford. Experts like Greensmith offer better results at a lower cost. Using an "à la carte menu" approach, retailers pick and choose the specific services or assistance they want.

## Checklists:

### Improving Security

— Motion-activated, 24/7 video cameras and microphones:

- Recording with minimum 30-day storage of all action
- Mobile phone alerts from activated cameras while closed
- Remote access of each camera on web or mobile, live or from data storage

— Motion-activated lights around each door and throughout parking lot, with mobile alerts

### Operational Issues

— Scheduling and payroll software:

- Recommends optimum schedule using customer volume per hour sales and personnel productivity
- Alerts management to all deviations between hours scheduled and worked
- Automatically computes all aspects of payroll, benefits, time off, etc.
- Alerts when employees have earned vacations, leaves, bonuses, overtime
- Integrates into General Ledger, W-2s; automates all further downstream processes

— Use GPS technology to route deliveries and track vehicle usage

— Give customers GPS locators to put in their yards to show delivery/installation crews where to install new trees, etc.

- Update your solar knowledge—sell oversupply to local utility
- Operate watering via phone app—including cameras to confirm greenhouse status

### **Marketing Support**

- Use vendor video displays/kiosks to entertain, educate and sell
- Customer-interfacing employees carry tablets to access inventory and product information

### **Handling Customer Payments**

- Remote credit card processing via phone/tablet\* (Think Square):
  - Allows “line busting”—salespeople become cashiers during peak times
  - Allows offsite (Think: farmers’ markets) processing of credit/debit cards
  - Becomes back-up payment system should power fail
- \*Caution: Confirm the transactions interface with inventory control system.
- If bank mergers accelerated your deposit fees, find a local credit union to process your deposit cheaper—or for free
- Get written okay from credit card processor to not require customer signatures
- Be ahead of the curve, accept Apple Pay/Google Pay now
- If warranted, consider the check scanner that turns checks into digital files, instantly deposits into your account, provides electronic reconciliation
- Consider only accepting credit/debit/gift cards (for more on going cashless, see “Safety, Efficiency or Sales?” on page 16)

### **Web/Social Media Marketing**

- Designate one person responsible for each medium; a specialist understands the uniqueness of the specific channel
- Encourage all employees to post their passions and areas of expertise
- Register customers online for classes, events; auto send event reminders:
  - Establish segregated email lists based on individualized customer interests
- Use social media to recruit—customers may be potential employees or refer others
- Can you follow/track and “remarket” to your website visitors?
- Are your name, address and phone evident on every page?
- Refocus social media strategy to build community: Portland Nursery earned over 11,000 Facebook followers;

they don't use Facebook to constantly push sales—instead, educate, entertain and encourage customers to share images

— Get help from experts

### **Internet as a Tool Beyond Marketing**

— Electronic employee recruitment through job search sites and/or LinkedIn

— Set a Google alert with your business name

- What are people saying about you as a retailer?
- As a possible employer? (Think GlassDoor.com)

— Education—Utilize your vendors/trade associations online educational opportunities for management and employees

— How do inventory management, online sales and purchasing tie in? Do you know how IT firms (Shopify, Big Commerce or Inventory Source) can solve your frustrations?

— Buy Online, Pick Up In Store (BOPIS) normally refers to mobile or web orders; have customers call in their orders; provide dedicated, short-term parking spaces for fast, seamless pick-up **GP**