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Now is the Best Time ...

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Imagine a brain-storming session with your team. The question: "How can we have bigger sales in summer and fall?" Someone mentions the sale of one tree can sometimes equal a dozen flats of bedding plants. Someone else mutters the proverb: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is today."

The scientific member of the team launches into a lecture about how planting later in the year actually benefits trees in the long term.

The cynic says, "But how do our current and potential customers know this?"

That swings the discussion to advertising frustrations and the general public's lack of horticultural knowledge. Soon the conversation turns to social media.

The realist says, "We use social media to talk at our customers, sell them stuff, show what's on sale and get money. We don't use it for horticultural education."

"That's wrong," says the mother of teenagers. "Social media is supposed to educate. We should use ours to explain how and why folks want to plant trees."

"That's not the point of social media," objects the youngest staff member. To her generation, social media means interaction within communities. Businesses have abused it by pitching their "buy, buy, buy!" messages without recognizing the orientation of its users.

Social media is successful when customers tell other customers what's cool about what you offer and why their friends should buy from you. It's a share-and-review process, not lectures to passive audiences. The most successful businesses encourage customers to disseminate their messaging while engaging with their friends.

The youngest staff member refocuses the group. "What do we want our customers or potential customers to learn, say and do? How do we make that a reality?"

So we talk about the need to educate customers that these months are the prime time to plant that tree they've wanted. We must help customers visualize what a tree will do for their enjoyment and property value.

You say, "What if we asked customers who bought trees last year to post the pictures of those trees on our social media? We could ask them to post what time of year they planted it and the joy they got from it blooming in the

spring? Maybe even pictures showing how it bloomed better each following spring as it matured.”

Our cynic asks, “Why would they? What’s in it for them?”

The teenager’s sigh says, “Some people don’t get it!” He weighs in. “If there are customers who’re social media-savvy, they’ll be thrilled to post—even to say our garden center asked them to.”

The realist offers, “What about a contest? Would that provoke people to post? How would it bring in new customers?”

You say, “We ask everyone we can, present and future customers, to post a picture of the tree they would like to have in their yard. We ask them to say why they like that specific tree. Our staff experts can weigh in on why now is a great time to plant that tree. How about a random drawing? We give the tree they’ve posted as a prize. If they’ve already bought it, we give them a refund.

“Think of it! We get lots of people posting and talking about trees in our slow season. We could pay to boost some posts to our entire list and maybe buy additional posts to those who aren’t on our list, but mirror our customers’ attributes. The whole cost would be less than a newspaper ad and it would start conversations with every customer about what tree—or trees—they’d like to see in their yard.”

So a simple idea, given a fertile discussion environment, can blossom into a campaign. When was the last time your team brainstormed how to generate sales during your slower times? **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.