

Features

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No Touch Retail

Katie Elzer-Peters

A global pandemic prompted the need to improvise on the fly this spring. Here are a few of those strategies. Next month—forming a permanent digital retail plan.

I'll cut to the chase: The good news is that (as of press time in mid-April) consumer demand for plants is up. The challenge is deciding how to fulfill the need by rapidly implementing an entirely different business model than what you're used to in the middle of your busiest season.

For some, this has meant creating an online store and fulfilling orders via pickup and delivery. For others, it involves posting pictures of availability on Facebook and taking phone orders for pickup or delivery. For everyone, it's stressful.

Here's a few ways to implement short-term solutions to engage customers, including exciting new ones that are popping out of the woodwork, while creating revenue streams that don't require on-site browsing.

Slip in a Little Extra

When you're dropping off plants at someone's house or sliding a flat of flowers into the trunk of a car, "they're a captive audience at that point," says Maria Zampini, president of UpShoot Hort. "Slip a sheet of paper with a positive message about plants alongside their order."

When customers buy spring supplies, remind them to come back for their tomatoes and marigolds. Share your social media handles and include a link to sign up for your email newsletter to get more gardening help. Invite them to share pictures or tag you so you can cheer their progress and keep them engaged.

Get Personal

Industry consultant Sid Raisch calls this "Operation Engaging Customers." He suggests looking at your POS and customer data (if you have data, but if not, anecdotally you probably know who some of your top customers are) and proactively reaching out to them to arrange private shopping, a home visit to give them a project plan and deliver the plants, or to pull an order for them to pick up.

"Relationship selling can result in double, triple or even quadrupling sales to each customer," he says. "I see this one superior method of impacting customers in a fully-engaged way as the best to accomplish the volume of sales anywhere near the amount to cover the expense obligations for the year. We simply must engage many customers in one-to-one relationships. And we must do this proactively, without waiting, and hoping that they come into our

stores, or calling in or placing an order online for pickup or delivery.”



Increase Average Order Value

Each online revenue solution relates to the next and this idea from Mason Day, Head of Community and Support for JR Peters Inc., will also work to increase transaction value with the opportunity to get personal. He says, “If most of our customers who come a couple of times to ‘figure it out’ are only coming once, we’ve got to help them figure it out!”

Mason created a sample graphic to demonstrate how you can put together a lookbook with prices so that customers can just “shop the look.” He cautions, “Don’t be pressured into thinking you have to discount if you

sell this way. You’re providing products and a service.”

Provide Solutions

Everybody is home and looking for things to do, including things for their kids to do. Many garden centers are turning their in-person workshops into grab-and-go kits, sometimes combined with online webinars to provide entertainment and learning opportunities.

Bothwell Farms in Manhattan, Illinois, did this by creating a seed kit for pickup. Owner Brad Bothwell says, “We decided to offer 10 seed packs of seeds and tags that we had an abundance of. We assembled the kit with a carrier tray, 12 pots, 10 seed packs (two to five seeds per), a gallon Ziplock bag with potting soil, two live plugs (petunias, impatiens, marigold or whatever we hadn’t planted in flats yet), and an instructions sheet. I offered free delivery for orders of 10 plus.” In seven days, they sold 766 kits. Here’s what he learned, in his own words:

- To do curbside, you better be organized—we averaged 100 units per day. I can’t imagine a few hundred with plant orders.

[bullet] Have someone to answer phones, texts and social media to take down orders. I encouraged all orders to come through as text so I could have a record. Phone calls were supposed to be only for credit card payments.

- Have an attendant to coordinate parking and loading of cars.

Simplify Offerings

“If I could use a word that meant more than chaos, I would,” Brad says about this new reality. Taking payment by phone or sending one-off electronic invoices, pulling orders and staging them for pickup or grouping, and route planning orders for delivery can be inefficient when done ad-hoc, but garden centers are trying and succeeding!

In the short term, though, the best thing garden centers can do is to simplify offerings. Grace Hensley, horticultural marketing strategist, says she wishes everyone would create a veggie garden to go.

“I’d start with what’s needed to plant a 4 in. x 4 in. vegetable garden. Have the staff take a picture or video and explain what’s in the box. Don’t say specific varieties. Just say, ‘One red lettuce, a six pack of green onions, four spinach plants, etc.,’” she says. “Stop giving the customers choices. We’re all knowledgeable gardeners and our customers will trust us.”

Again, at the time of writing, customers are expressing effusive thanks to garden centers for offering plants for purchase — any plants. By limiting choices to general packages, you also limit the possibilities for error when fulfilling orders and reducing customer “feedback” about errors.

The possibilities for alternative revenue are almost endless, so try to start something simple, stick to it and then add on.

“Winning or losing this year is going to be a matter of not giving up. It’s a matter of sticking to it. If you can make every day better, you can get further than you think by the end of the year,” says Sid.

Curbside Pickup/Delivery Order Fulfillment Tips

Switching from walk-in retail to online/phone order and curbside pickup is a huge undertaking. Here are some tips for reconfiguring your setup, schedule and space to fulfill orders more efficiently:

- Assign specific roles to staff, including a curbside program manager and managers for order receiving, invoicing, tracking, pulling and completion (hand-off to customer).
- Simplify offerings. There’s simply no time to let customers choose from multiple varieties. Make packages (10-pack of colorful sun annuals, pollinator perennials, salsa garden) and allow people to pick from what’s available, or offer limited plants until they sell out and then publicize a new offering.
- Limit curbside pickup hours. Offer pickup only from noon to 4:00 p.m. each day or 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. to give your staff time to pull orders in the morning. Enforce a cutoff time for pickup such as “Order by 5:00 p.m. for pickup starting noon the next day.” Label each order with customer name and try to stage in alphabetical order for pickup.
- Accept email or online orders only. That way you have a paper trail for the order that you can print out for pulling. Follow up with an online invoice for contactless payment. **GP**