

Features

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Digital Solutions on the Fly

Bill Calkins

As the usual spring rush was ramping up at garden centers across North America, the realities of a pandemic were also setting in and things really got interesting, to say the least.

How were shoppers going to react? Would the demand for plants and garden products take a backseat to the global crisis or would a sheltered-in-place population turn to gardening as an essential and healthy activity? And what should my store do—in terms of staffing, procuring products and serving customers?

These concerns and questions were real and continue to be top of mind for garden retailers of all sizes and formats. Looking back, gardening demand was high—some called it “unprecedented”—and the population’s desire for nature-based activities was refreshing and certainly essential. What was also exciting was how many garden centers pivoted from a primarily contact-based and in-person approach to contactless, digital and social. For a few, this was as easy as flipping a switch and leaning more on e-commerce, and electronic systems and processes already in place. But for most, it was all about partnerships and working relationships with technology providers in the market.

Talking with these technology providers, the scramble to implement systems for online sales, digital information sharing and consumer interaction existed on both sides—the technology provider and the retailer. Some of these systems went quickly from being considered a “nice to have” to critical. And just about everyone the editors at Green Profit have talked with over the past few months agree that once the pandemic ends, there’s no going back to the old way of doing business. Retail, from the smallest local business to the largest global power players, has changed.

Satisfying an Immediate Need

Ken Klopp, president at Smart Plant Home and The Perfect Plant providing a range of digital solutions for garden centers, explains that in spring 2020 retailers were between a rock and a hard place.

“Shoppers in many areas couldn’t come into stores, more people were looking to gardening, and plant and product information was not on the majority of retailer websites,” he says. “We used our current technology with The Perfect Plant to help, but quickly developed a short-term e-commerce solution called ‘Curbside Cart’ to help retailers manage the influx of demand on the staff with calls and online orders.”

Pre-COVID, having a problem solver and plant search on the website was an additional service. But once things changed, it became a necessity and helped drive online sales.

Similarly, Sam Kirkland, national business development strategist for EPICOR, saw garden centers go through phases as the spring progressed.

“Initially, it was understanding contactless shopping and the need to add mobile payments like Apple Pay and Samsung Pay,” he explains. “This transitioned to curbside pickup, and for those stores with an e-commerce solution, it maintained the business.”

Unfortunately, those who didn’t have a solution to maintain business online struggled. EPICOR fast-tracked implementing e-commerce solutions and actually had one business come live with a new e-commerce site in 14 days, Sam says.

Ready to Go

Although many garden centers had considered and explored, but not yet implemented, e-commerce and digital product strategies, leading technology vendors inside and outside the garden retail industry had such systems and products ready to go. Many stores were able to get up and running with some level of online ordering and e-commerce in time to serve shoppers effectively.

There were many examples of strategies employed to post products online and allow for digital ordering. In some cases, e-commerce was accomplished—with processes even as simple as calling ahead, requesting products and paying over the phone with a credit card. Curbside pickup became the common way of doing business in many areas and it worked pretty well. But tracking profitability with this new way of doing business was certainly a struggle.

Helping garden centers crunch the numbers is a core competency for EPICOR and Sam says stores using their systems were able to gain a good understanding of the financial side of decisions made in the heat of the moment during an unprecedented time.

“The ability to have metrics available to monitor and maintain what was happening in the business was a key to our successful customers,” he says. “As businesses adapted on the fly from being open with limited customers to curbside pickup and delivery, we helped them understand the financial side of their decision. Was it worth the effort?”

He goes on to say some programs consumed too much labor and when evaluated were either continued in order to maintain customer numbers, modified or canceled based on impact to the business. Having such business management tools in place within existing systems allowed retailers to make smarter decisions.

Emerging Smarter

We’ve heard this a lot lately: some people (and by extension businesses) will emerge from the pandemic better than they were before. This might just be the case for garden centers. Being forced to adapt to new ways of doing business in a digital environment, learning techniques to educate and provide resources to shoppers, becoming more flexible and adaptable, and leveraging partnerships to increase the ease of doing business are all positive movements.

Sam believes partnerships between vendors and retailers will strengthen.

“Procuring inventory will be top of mind and businesses will look to improve relationships to create the right balance,” he says. “I believe businesses will have the ability to reduce the number of SKUs they carry. I also feel this is a great opportunity to promote quality and charge the right price for it.” Business will be run in a more efficient and profitable structure in the future, he adds.

“Retailers were very appreciative of what we provided during the pandemic this spring,” Ken says of The Perfect Plant’s decision to help garden centers put product online and the ability to provide curbside pickup. “Since then, we’ve developed our technology even further to better help stores’ day-to-day operations, as well as bring new and existing customers back into their stores.”

This brings up an excellent point—now that garden centers welcomed new customers into the fold this spring, the next step is keeping them engaged and coming back for more.

A Quick Look to the Future

Although this article is about how retailers adapted to an unprecedented spring with the help of retail technology providers, there's no doubt any of the changes made and processes implemented on the fly will become how business is done moving forward. E-commerce isn't going away—it's become how we order our dinner, dog food and toothpaste. Curbside pickup is a much-appreciated option for many time-starved shoppers. Online education and product information is the preferred learning style for many people. For all of these reasons and many more, garden centers must stay on top of the technology available and create partnerships with providers to capitalize on the latest trends.

Ken says retail shouldn't go back to the way it was pre-COVID.

"This pandemic is forcing retailers to think differently. Before it was nice to have plant and product information on the store website," he says. "This is now an essential new business practice for survival and longevity." Low-friction e-commerce solutions and seamless order flow is another example of the new normal, he says.

Mobile POS is another component to doing business today and presumably, in the future, according to Sam.

"For consumers who want to shop in store, mobile offers options to help shoppers wherever they are in your business, without a physical barrier. Your staff should not have to find a terminal to help a customer—it should be with them," he says. "Many of our customers offering curbside pickup with mobile POS were able to add items to the transaction by having soil, fertilizer, containers and mulch staged where they could [ring it up and] put it into the car."

As you evaluate how business was conducted and positives and negatives coming out of an unprecedented 2020, think about the technology and solutions you had in place, put in place and the ones you wished you had. Look at how other retailers adapted, consider your own experiences as a shopper and how businesses made your pandemic shopping experiences seamless. Remember this was a new experience for everyone and we're all emerging changed in all sorts of ways. Your business is no different—and how you evolve could be the key to your future. **GP**