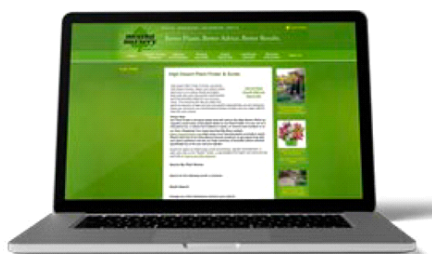


Features

6/1/2021

Resources to Lighten the E-commerce Load

Katie Elzer-Peters



If an e-commerce website were a plant, it would be Audrey II from “Little Shop of Horrors,” always wanting to be fed. Websites are basically “alive,” in that they’re not set-it-and-forget-it pieces of collateral. If you can adapt your mindset to think of your website in that way you’ll be less disappointed when you have to constantly update it. Website food? Well, it’s product descriptions, plugin updates, price adjustments, inventory reconciliation and more.

How do you avoid being devoured by your e-comm website? Feed it something else. Here are three horticulture-specific solutions for hungry e-comm websites.

NetPS Plant Finder and NetPS Plus: Plant Descriptions and Photos

NetPS Plant Finder has been available since 2004. It’s a searchable plant information database (database—not an e-commerce store) developed by James Kohut, President of Northscaping, Inc. It’s hosted and updated by Northscaping, but garden centers can embed the plant finder on their site like they would, say, embed a YouTube video on their site for customers to view on their site instead of leaving to watch on YouTube. When Northscaping updates the database with new pictures or products, it updates everywhere, including on garden centers’ websites.

Garden centers can choose the plants they want their customers to be able to search for on the garden center’s website. Then customers can browse, do research and use a branded wish list feature that’s an optional add-on for the NetPS Plant Finder.

“This branded, printable wish list drives customers to the store,” says James. “We’re still a tactile industry, and after COVID goes away, people will still like to touch and feel and smell the plants.” What it does, says James, is “easily add an interactive informational component to a garden center’s e-commerce store that’s available to customers 24/7/365.”

Compared to other solutions, it requires almost no effort from the garden center. It’s important to try to communicate to customers on the page where the Plant Finder is embedded that it’s not for inventory, but rather for information, and that they must visit your shop (online or physical location) to see currently available products.

In spring 2021, Northscaping started making the data that runs the Plant Finder available to garden centers in the form of an export of all of the plants and all of the photos in a format that you can edit and use on your own e-

commerce website.

Yes, it's a lot of data. And, yes, you'll need someone to go through it, delete columns for information you don't need, and get it ready for upload to your e-commerce website. NetPS Plus isn't an automatic solution. It is, however, a solution to a big problem most garden centers have, and that's writing complete, accurate, uniform plant descriptions and finding accurate photos with appropriate licenses.

You can't just grab images off the Internet and slap them on your website without verifying the image license requirements, which could include paying a fee or displaying attribution of the image source. Skip the licensing step and you could face legal action. It's also incredibly expensive to get someone to write plant descriptions from scratch. NetPS Plus is a hands-on resource, but is an economical way for garden centers to license vast amounts of data, organized in one place.

OrderEase: Connecting IGC E-comm Websites to Distributors & Suppliers

Looking for a true data feed for your e-commerce? That's where OrderEase comes in.

Ken Klopp, owner of Marketing Garden, creator of The Perfect Plant database product and U.S. partner with OrderEase, says, "What is a data feed? It's an automated way of sending updated information from point to point ... It reduces manual effort, errors and the big word in our industry: 'work.'"

So how does it work? The easiest way is to think of OrderEase itself as the subway that connects terminals at the Atlanta Airport, taking passengers from planes in one terminal to another and vice versa. Only OrderEase moves data from distributor or manufacturer websites to garden center websites and POS or ERP systems and then back again. The program can facilitate drop shipping for garden centers with their existing vendors, allow garden centers to place orders that update on the garden center side and the vendor side, and more.

Sounds too good to be true, yes? It's really not. In fact, Ken explained that Warren Patterson, co-founder and CEO of OrderEase, developed OrderEase after opening Barrie Garden Centre in Ontario, Canada, and feeling the pain of managing product information from distributors. The OrderEase system started with that communication loop and grew from there. The OrderEase website gives a great overview of the product, and notes that there are easy connections between vendors and WooCommerce, Shopify and Weebly/Square shopping carts. The exact ins and outs are best explained via phone. If you want more of your e-commerce data routing to happen "automatically," and you're looking for a product developed by someone that truly understands green industry issues, OrderEase is well worth a look.

Bower & Branch: E-comm+

If you've wanted to offer more unusual trees, larger sizes and/or a full range of drop-shipped living gift options to your customers without investing in the inventory and infrastructure yourself, Bower & Branch is one of the more hands-off e-comm options. Garden centers can integrate B&B items as part of their e-comm store or link out to the B&B storefront as affiliates and receive a commission (and allow customer to buy online and pick up at their local garden center).

Kathryn Thompson, Chief Growth Officer at Eden Grene, parent company of Bower & Branch says that Bower & Branch offerings are best for augmenting existing e-commerce programs and allows garden centers "to play online with digital search and compete against big e-comm or big box retailers."

She revisits the point that Ken makes regarding the pervasive "do-it-all-yourself" mentality in the green industry (we're all guilty of that—me included), saying "You don't have to figure it all out yourselves. You can align yourselves with strategic partners."

That's the future of e-commerce in horticulture, really, and the point of this piece. To let you know what's available, what's coming and some ways you can use these resources so you don't have to grow an e-commerce business from scratch. It isn't advisable, it isn't necessary and it won't work. Gathering the right experts and partners to help you, will. **GP**

Katie Elzer-Peters is the owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a green-industry digital marketing agency. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com.