

Features

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Make Your Message Heard

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Do you feel overwhelmed about the scope of content marketing and all of the available spaces where you can promote your business?

You may think that you're too busy to worry about it or you may assign different staff members to post pictures on various social media sites. You still need to use content marketing no matter how you handle getting it out to the world. And it would help if you organized your digital marketing plan before your peak season begins.

Getting Started: Knowing Your Brand

What is your independent garden center's brand? What would you say if you needed to describe your company's brand in 30 seconds or less?

You need to go big, start with your brand and then funnel down to digital marketing tools that get your message out to the world. Susan Markgraf of GreenMark Media asks independent retailers: "What's your wow?"

Susan starts with that question to brainstorm with crucial IGC staff during her Grow Your Message Workshop. When an IGC partners with GreenMark Media, they first need to go through an eight-hour workshop to discover their brand story.

"It's a little more involved than what an IGC is expecting or wanting in there initially. Once they understand the benefits of doing this exercise, then it's a given and it's rock-solid," Susan explains.

When an IGC attends the workshop, the company owner attends with the marketing director, as well as the cashiers and managers because they communicate the company's message out to the world. And when the IGC staff completes the required workshop, they find that they're more bonded with the owners and have a unified brand to share with their audience.

Katie McCoy Dubow of Garden Media Group agrees that you first need to nail down your brand. Then, you need to plan how you'll deliver content that tells your brand's story and keeps your audience in the loop about what's happening at your store.

"IGCs, number one, create a conversation with your content. But also be a part of a larger conversation, which is the whole point of hashtags to help amplify your message by using what's already being talked about," Katie explains.

And Katie also says that it's important to get the plan and the hashtags ready now before the peak season rushes in when no one has time to research the best hashtags or come up with a relevant blog topic.

"I think, especially as we get into the heat of the season in our industry, the last thing anyone wants to think about is

what are they going to post on social media, what blog they're going to write, what newsletter is going to be sent," Katie says. "So creating and crafting a plan in the down season helps people in the spring when customers need it the most. [Customers] need that content then and often we're too busy to create it."

Katie adds there are multiple ways of attacking a content marketing plan. Use available calendar templates and dedicate time per week to work on the different ways you use digital marketing to talk about new vegetables, seed starting and how to prune trees, for example.

Always Remember Your Audience

Finding your brand's story is vital and getting a plan down now will help you stay in touch with your audience throughout the busy spring season. But who is your audience?

"I do think that if we're talking about the audience here, and you know as a content person or if you're developing content, you need to figure out who you're writing for. Who's your audience?" Katie says. "And figuring out who your audience is, is a number one strategy to help you determine whether your marketing (is working) and what those marketing tactics are."

Susan Martin of Gardener Sue's News says the content you produce for your audience must be authentic.

"Consumers know authentic content immediately when they see it. It's not patronizing or salesy—it's interesting, engaging information that originates out of a genuine concern for your customers and your passion for your product. Choosing who that dynamic content creator will be to represent your business is a critical decision."

Susan has spent seven years creating content and developing a brand identity for Proven Winners on Instagram. And she uses her strengths of educating and relating to people on a practical level.

"Our followers have come to realize that we genuinely care and want to help them succeed," Susan says.

She also advises IGCs to listen to their customers and carry that care to their newsletters, blogs and website copy.

"When you plan your newsletter and website copy around what your customers have told you they want to know more about, they notice. Your reward for listening and following through is a more engaged audience. You'll notice it in your numbers—higher open rates for your newsletters, longer views on videos, more visits to key webpages," states Susan.

She adds that using social media to point people back to those videos, newsletters and web pages makes more people aware that the content exists, increasing newsletter subscribers and website visitors.

"Every point along the marketing loop is needed to keep customers actively engaged," Susan says.

Sage Advice: Build On Your Own Land

C.L. Fornari of GardenLady.com is a podcaster, speaker and author. She advises IGCs to build on their "land," including their website, blog, newsletter, video and other digital marketing tools they already own. Once you've established your content, go to Google and see what questions people ask.

"I would say that everybody in the garden center knows the common questions people in their area are asking because people ask them in the garden center. Why don't my blue hydrangeas flower? Why aren't I getting zucchini? That sort of thing.

"So IGCs should start with their staff brainstorming. What do you hear from your customers every day? Write all that stuff down because that's what people are Googling. So then knowing that people are Googling, 'How to prune my roses,' you put content on your website that has those words; title the blog with those words," C.L. explains.

C.L. also recommends putting your location in your blogs, newsletters and social media. Google sees these words and your rankings should start to rise.

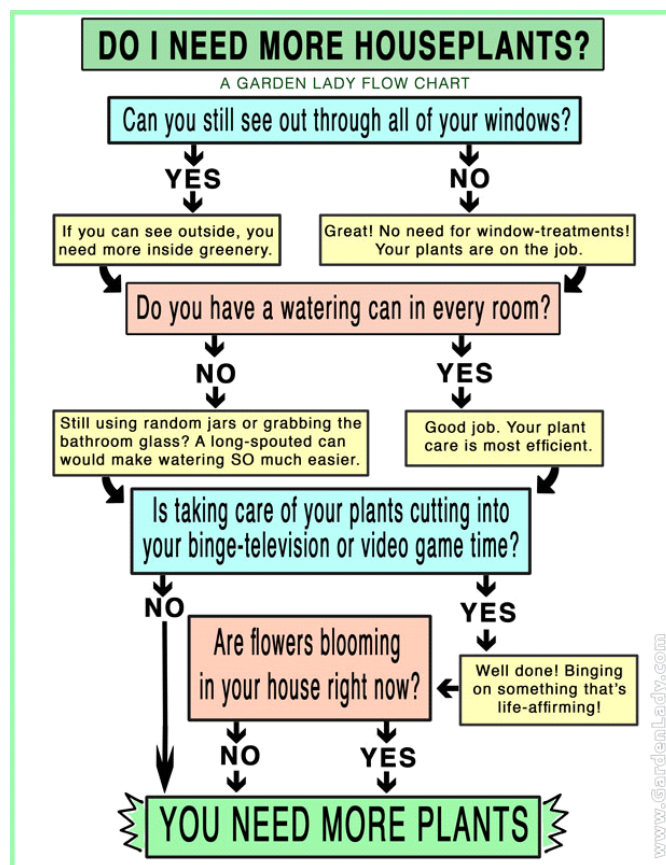
“Google loves lists—‘Five tips for planting a vegetable garden in Arkansas,’” she says. “Google loves this list, so include those words in the first paragraph of whatever you’re posting online.”

C.L. also recommends adding the blog or web page’s title to the photographs you include in your newsletters and blogs. You would add the title in the alt text section and the photo’s caption. Finally, C.L. also recommends breaking your customers into segments and sending texts to them when their favorite plants are stocked.

“I think of interest in the future moving forward to see what interest your community has for direct communication is via text,” C.L. says. “Not constantly spamming them, but are your customers interested in getting a text when a new shipment of annuals or vegetables come in?”

“All of our customers who say, ‘Well, I came in on a wrong day and the six-pack of vegetables are all sold out.’ Do they want a text telling them so we become better at going directly to the customer?”

All of the tools mentioned by these four garden communicators serve to help IGCs of all sizes and budgets. They’ve provided lots of great ideas for getting your message out there. Think about what’s feasible for your company and get the ball rolling.



Outsourcing Content

C.L. Fornari, The Garden Lady, recommends that you hire local freelancers if you need some help with posting on social media or writing a blog.

“There are people you can hire that can write your garden center newsletter. It helps if [the freelancer] is local. It doesn’t have to take a lot of time.”

Garden Communicators International (formerly Garden Writers Association) has a directory that includes freelance bloggers, newsletter writers and social media managers. To find a local communicator, visit GardenComm’s website, gardencomm.org, and click on the tab Meet GardenComm. Then click on Find a Garden Communicator.

Whether you write it yourself or outsource it, make sure the content is engaging and fun. C.L. notes that including humor or even silliness in your content and social media encourages people to read your content.

“I recently did a flowchart and it’s on my blog called ‘Do I Need More Houseplants?’ It ends up at the bottom that,

of course, you need more houseplants! It’s lighthearted and it’s amusing. And that’s content that appeals,” C.L. says with a chuckle. **GP**

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