

A SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDE

FOR FLORAL RETAILERS AND WHOLESALERS

Case Study: **Midwestern Garden Center**

Company History

This Midwestern Garden Center (MGC) agreed to share their use of social media, but preferred to remain anonymous for purposes of this project. The business operates a retail store and online store, both based in the Midwest. They have been in operation for slightly more than a decade, although this garden center was in business before they took over. The owners, Jim and Jane, aren't their real names.

When they bought the business, they had no intention of selling plants in a retail setting as a garden center. With the past history of the garden center and the online presence, the local demand quickly rose. They heard that local customers found them through another gardening website (another web presence they own). In 2006, they reopened the garden center in a small way and have slowly developed it.

Overall Marketing Strategy

For the retail store, they use direct mail, radio commercials, and emails to garden center customers because they are easy to track. For stimulating sales through the website, the most effective tool was email. They used to see spikes in sales shortly after the emails were sent but now, people don't pay as much attention to emails. They used to send one email per week, but now they send 2-3 per week. Most emails contain the same message (about the same plant or topic), but have a different look. They use photographs which aim to catch their eye, so they open the email, and make a purchase. Jane uses Facebook but it is hard to tell who the majority of the followers are (local or national). She thinks it is a good mix of both. They don't use Twitter per se, but use Facebook posts to Twitter.

Website

The website is used to generate in-store sales (for pick-up) or shipment. Their customers are nearly nationwide, with a majority in urban areas. Prices for pick-up are different than prices for delivery. The online ordering for in-store pick-up has grown substantially. Jane blogs from January through March, during which time, she would sit and create 5 new blog postings but post them every 2-3 days.

They are trying to blog around the plant variety. They focus the blog for new introductions and personal experience. The blog isn't up as Midwestern Garden Center but is another website that tries to get several links into Midwestern Garden Center. John does the research on SEO. The main reason for the blog is meant to drive traffic to website. All the efforts are focused to call to action to buy. Hopefully they will see the retail website.

Social Media Use

Facebook adds a bit of a fun perspective to MGC's marketing strategy. A lot of what Jane does is putting pictures on Facebook. She will start a game with MGC's customers. For example, she will post a close-up photograph and ask "Friends" to guess what the plant is. This game engages the followers and often MGC has that plant on sale or offers a promotion to people who mention Facebook when they come in to buy the plant. Jane takes many photographs in her garden and posts information from her personal experience as a mother and gardener. Her "Friends" are also mothers and gardeners and want to know what is blooming in her garden. Jane was using Facebook personally because she wanted to stay connected to friends (wasn't a big poster). The MGC friends care more about her gardening activities. The business sees Facebook as one more avenue to get in front of their customer. They began as a group and then developed a business page. John saw it as an avenue to drive sales. MGC has 1600 Facebook Friends. She doesn't use FB demographics but John knew their FB Friends are mostly females between 35 and 55. He thinks their followers represent their online customers.

John saw what the technology could do but Jane saw the social and fun aspects. Pinterest is big for them this year. She signed up for it last summer and didn't look or post on it much. She posted some pictures (which weren't copyrighted). She searched for 'Midwestern Garden Center pictures' and their customers had already posted them online. She can't stop them from posting non-copyrighted photographs. In 2012, Pinterest was bigger than Facebook for word-of-mouth sharing. If Jane pins something on her board, her friends will see what she pinned and then repin it to their friends. Jane has 6 boards going (and people are pinning her photographs for her). The annual combinations got the most repins. She was on their Google analytics and saw that Pinterest was the primary director of traffic to them. It happened literally overnight (from their perspective). That is what got her to start her boards. She just started this spring and personally did it last year, but added MGC in January or February. She thinks it is bigger than Facebook. Facebook is 12th in driving traffic to their site, their Blog is 13th in driving traffic, Pinterest is 14th (in six months), Google is #1.

Measures of Success

John looks at metrics from Google Analytics to see what worked in the past. In the height of the busy season, he doesn't have the time to check the analytics web page. He looks at key words and says Analytics is an awesome tool for that. In the slow season, he is on Google Analytics every day. Jane will watch it when she sends out the email using Real Time which shows the link and where they are. She watches the spikes as they open their email. She sends out email mid-morning. He showed me 16 people on the website on a Monday morning. The other key measure of success is sales reports from Quickbooks.

How Did They Do It?

John is the IT guy and the grower; Jane. John really enjoys the technology. His degree is in finance but he taught himself IT. He's been in the greenhouse business since 3rd grade. He stays current during the show times (perennial shop through October). He focuses on the emerging technology then. He reads online. He pushed to start the FB page, but then Jane took over. Jane works on the email now.

Pinterest emerging as a leader in communication

Thinking about the time spent on the online work, how much time do you spend? Jane probably spends on average an hour to 1.5 hours every day on Facebook. Jane is focused on online customer service and online marketing. She did not physically work in the garden center this year. Emails take her 8 hours to construct 3 good emails. They are not informative emails. People don't want to read. She takes pictures and edits them and puts them into emails. Many of her photos are already on Pinterest. They haven't used Pinterest as a sales tool, but use it to promote Midwestern Garden Center. The email goes to Facebook. They integrate the blog, Facebook, and email very well. Pinterest to Twitter is one step. Her Facebook goes right to Twitter. Twitter is definitely the youngest generation. The Twitter followers they have are in college, but not quite buyers yet. They hit Twitter everyday, but they don't physically do that. The email goes to her blog daily. John is spending more time in research to set up the processes. He does not look at the Facebook page. He averages 5-6 hours per week on the online stuff, but most of that happens during the off season. Jane refreshes the website content between November and February, when she posts the new plant information. She works roughly 50 hours per week. She sends the email then Google can find it on the blog (posted there). She may not put all three emails on the blog, but does at least add one. An archive can be set up through I Contact. John doesn't want to drive them to an I Contact site, but wants them coming to Midwestern Garden Center. John is spending 25% to 33% more time now. He's added the "like" button to Facebook and the blog. Jane spends about 25% more time now.

A business needs to make a commitment to social media; they should not start and stop. They recommend having someone dedicated to it. They had Google

Plus since it came out. Not many people there, but they are poised to move there quickly.

They do not pay for ads or pay for clicks. They did try it but it was too costly. They conducted a three week experiment and paid for the clicks, but it didn't yield the sales they hoped. They may have 3500 fans on Facebook, but the interaction was not there. They try to use the retail site as the local, personal page and Jane is the personality. Newspaper, radio, and magazine ads didn't work for them. Direct mail was tracked and worked. John was adamant about being able to track the impact of the money spent. They put a coupon in the paper to track it, but that didn't work. They didn't get the coupons. Pinterest was a big surprise to Jane. She was surprised how many people pinned their plants.

Commenting. Employees are allowed but no one does. Jane deals with the negative comments, but they don't get many. They get a lot of questions about plants (why are they dying)? She will get occasional negative comments through email and she handles those. They use the Google notification service for Midwestern Garden Center when anyone posts something about MGC, they are notified. They have everything connected through one website, but they have more control when they integrate it themselves. Revenue traffic from Facebook is up 30% this year (people placing orders online).

John hates texting but will invest some time to explore this option. John has a mobile ready website and if people want to opt in for texting, they want to be ready. They just converted their website to mobile ready for all of the smart phones Spring 2012. Jane doesn't like the small text. John hired a programmer to convert the site. It took that person a year, but MGC was one of the first they converted. John pushes the technology company to adopt the technology. Why aren't the email companies making smart phone ready or mobile ready emails? Mobile email and texting will be the next development for them and (John sees) for the business world.

Pearls of wisdom.

Don't pay for clicks. Track everything. Use analytics. Focus on SM. Don't get into it and just leave it. Commit to it and persevere. John thinks it is better to post several times per week. Jane posts in the evening and seems to get a good response. They get bigger sales in the later hours. Stay on top of it! Be focused. Schedule things. Use I Contact to schedule the email and Facebook. They send emails in the morning to be more effective. Jane works on Sundays and Mondays to get her emails ready, then she schedules the email to go out and posts on Facebook.