

A SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDE FOR FLORAL RETAILERS AND WHOLESALERS

Case Study: Ball Horticultural Company

Company Overview

Started by George J. Ball in 1905 as a cut flower wholesale company in West Chicago, Ball Horticultural Company has now developed into an international corporation consisting of many wholly-owned and joint-venture subsidiaries worldwide. The company excels in the breeding, research, production and distribution of seed and vegetative ornamental products. Ball is also involved in professional literature publishing and education. Its business scope almost covers the entire ornamental horticulture industry.¹

En route to becoming arguably the largest privately held horticultural business in the U.S., Ball has introduced many innovative and award-winning plant varieties to the market including the Wave Petunia® Family, Dazzler®, Simply Beautiful® and Circle of Life™ programs exclusively for independent garden centers. Even though Ball does not directly sell to home gardeners, there are still several designated consumer brands including Wave Petunias®, Burpee Home Garden® and Cool Wave Pansies®, etc.

In this case study, the perspective is on investigating the robust social media initiatives that Ball Horticulture has adopted in their marketing efforts, as well as the successes and difficulties they have encountered in using social media tools.

Marketing Programs and Strategy of Ball

In general, Ball Horticulture is striving to be THE chosen brand for end consumers by providing products with desirable features and benefits. Yet, because they mainly supply growers and landscapers, Ball's direct contact with individual consumers are limited. Therefore, in order to generate consumer demands and successfully entice customers to pull their products through the distribution chain, a pull-through strategy is set as the overarching marketing approach in Ball's consumer-based branding lines/programs.

“Burpee Home Garden” is one such example of the successful programs targeting home gardeners. The brand includes several collections of garden vegetables, annuals, patio pot plants, etc. Each of the product lines highlight appealing features that consumers prefer: something as simple as providing a

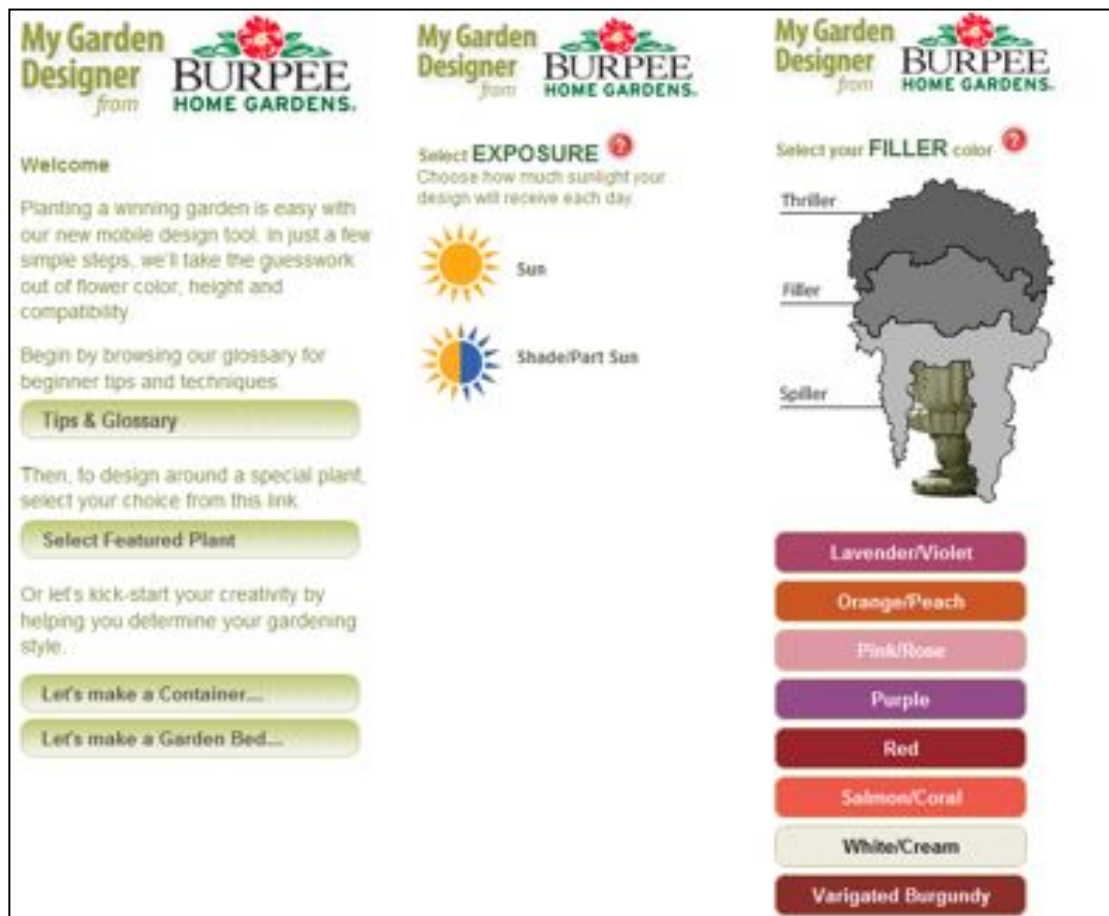
¹ http://www.ballhort.cn/about_us.aspx

tomato variety that fits customer expectations of fruit size, days to harvest, or taste (e.g. for food recipes), or as cutting edge as introducing the nutrition “**BOOST**” vegetables containing more vitamins and antioxidants. All of these efforts are concentrating on making the plants more appealing to consumers.

Burpee Home Garden also initiated a public relations campaign through mobile tools and several consumer educational programs to enhance customer loyalty by developing a convenient product selection process and helping gardeners grow the vegetables or flowers with professional and easily available gardening knowledge. **Burpee Home Garden Coach™** is a text message platform that Ball built in aim of assisting gardeners to successfully grow their plants in different geographic locations in U.S. Users can easily sign up by sending their zip codes through the text message to the platform and they will then receive timely reminders, planting instructions, harvest tips and even fresh veggie recipes.

Another program called “**I can grow**” was developed to support the interest in home vegetable gardening among younger and novice gardeners. This educational program together with **Burpee Home Garden Coach™** is extensively promoted through Ball’s websites as well as the company’s social media sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). The goal is always to generate pull-through by educating and engaging consumers to the point that they always purchase the products through Burpee retailers.

My Garden Designer is another tool that Ball designed to simplify the process of choosing plants for container or bedding gardens. As effortless as people might think it is, choosing a mix for containers or garden bed can be complicated. For example, customers should avoid mixing vigorous plants with the non-vigorous types; as well as mixing shade-loving plants with sun-loving plants, etc. The advantage of My Garden Designer is that the tool has dissolved the choice-making process into three easy steps: (1) determine the garden type; (2) select the exposure type (shade or sun) and, (3) choose colors. Using the tool simultaneously boosts consumers’ confidence level in gardening, which is considered an important factor in developing brand loyalty.



Online Marketing Strategy

In the green Industry, adopting social media as a marketing tool is still in its infancy stage, especially since gardening still heavily relies on hands-on and in-person experiences. For most firms, their business website has been their main representation on the Internet to the consumers. As a result, when social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, etc. emerged as new platforms for offering information, the relationship that companies commonly built up between their home websites and those social network sites tended to be linear; that is, with the official website remaining as the center of information and social media sites functioning as the branches to spread the message out.

Ball has managed to make their social websites more than just simple affiliations with the website (www.ballhort.com); those social media outlets are developed so that they can stand-alone and provide relevant content that consumers are looking for. In certain cases, the home website is good for referring consumers back to as it is more comprehensive, especially when demonstrating product catalogues and accessing the plant databases.

The major social media tools that Ball engages in for their marketing activities include Facebook, Twitter, RSS feeds, blogs, podcasts, YouTube, and Pinterest. Also, Ball uses Hootsuite as an internal way to manage their social media profiles, track conversations, and measure marketing campaign results. Using “Burpee Home Garden” program again as the example, the principle social media sites have been incorporated in the home page and illustrated in eye-catching positions so that whenever the users visit Burpee’s websites, more additional content is available by following either through Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest or audio/video content on YouTube or podcasts.



When asked about LinkedIn, Ball considered it as a more appropriate platform for colleagues’ communication, attracting like-minded business associates, pushing discussion topics, and providing commentaries, etc.

RSS feeds are used by Ball as another social media tool to organize the company’s publishing content. They will syndicate and bring together news, blogs and podcasts into one reader’s format. By generating subscriptions through e-mail news blasts or Twitter, the posts can reach consumers in the various ways they prefer. In social media applications, the most important perspective to remember is that users should be the ones in power.

The Burpee Home Garden blog has been integrated with RSS and Twitter to create messages and connect users and customers. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that Pinterest (the latest social media site utilized by Ball) has become a simple but effective tool for moving people from social media engagement to actually making a purchase. For companies adopting Pinterest,

posting and then encouraging followers to pin pictures helps to increase consumer knowledge and enable them to be more successful gardeners.

Yet, the purpose of having social commentary and interaction is not just for getting clicks and high fan counts, but creating customer awareness, excitement, and high levels of engagement. One success Ball experienced with social media usage came from a marketing campaign event called “Burpee petunia giveaway” in which the effect of Facebook advertising was tested.



Each year, there will be hundreds of fans at the point of entry for Ball’s annual petunia giveaway event during which around 1,000-1,800 free samples of petunias that are not available in market yet will be given away to consumers. In 2012, the company decided to not only offer the free samples to the list of current wave petunia fan base, but the giveaway was also open to Burpee Home Garden’s Facebook page followers. Adopting Facebook for this kind of free giveaway campaign saves the company from having issues with customer information invalidation. Facebook allows Ball to create the online sign up, which gives the company clear and updated information of consumers who requested the sample giveaway and saves it from having to send sample packages to consumers with outdated addresses. What is more interesting for Ball is that while Facebook is generally considered as the gathering place for a younger audience, the demographic in this fan club and giveaway event are folks that are between 45-50 years of age. This reflects the fact that older demographic segments really are starting to use social media.

Burpee Home Gardens @BurpeeHG
 Helping a new generation of gardeners discover the enjoyment of growing and preparing veggies at home.
 Garden centers nationwide <http://www.burpeehomegardens.com>

Following 1,637 TWEETS
 874 FOLLOWING
 3,033 FOLLOWERS

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Tweets

- Burpee Home Gardens** @BurpeeHG · 25 Aug
 My favorite thing about Burpee is _____
 Collapse Reply Retweet Favorite
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- Gregg Voss** @Greggvoss · 25 Aug
 @BurpeeHG BOOST, by far. Have a terrible cold today and could have used more antioxidants....
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About Burpee Home Gardens
 We're growing the next generation of home gardeners! Watch the Burpee Home Gardens YouTube channel for the latest news and information on vegetables and flowers.
burpeehomegardens.com

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Latest Activity Jul 18, 2012
 Date Joined Dec 22, 2010
 Age 43
 Country United States

Burpee Gardening

Burpee's Tips For The Garden
 361 subscribers

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Joe's Picks - UpTown Zinnia
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Thursday, August 16, 2012

Our school garden is sprouting more than just veggies!

West End IB World School | 3 Comments

0 tweets

Thanks to Burpee Home Gardens and the "I Can Grow" Youth Garden Award, West End IB World School students, teachers and parents had another successful gardening season!

This past April, students planted a variety of tomatoes, eggplant, okra, green beans, zucchini, wat...

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Welcome! We want to be your support center for modern-day vegetable gardening. Our panel of expert authors is ready to share fun and interesting tips, tricks and ideas to help you create a successful vegetable garden. And we want to inspire a new generation of gardeners. Go on, dig around, tell us what you think.

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Burpee Gardens

Tasty tomatoes, fragrant flowers, beautiful berries, aromatic herbs and gorgeous gardens inspire us. We're here to share that inspiration. To connect with other gardeners, visit burpee.com/community

Warminster, Pennsylvania

Replies from

-  Catherine Walker
-  Barbara Landrith
-  Grow Food, Grow Hope

16 Boards 480 Pins 8 Likes Activity [Follow All](#) 1,574 Followers 150 Following

Garden Visitors
22 pins



Follow

Gardener's Delight
16 pins



Follow

What Goes Around Co...
64 pins



Follow

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83 pins



Follow

Addicted to Veggies!
61 pins



Follow

Measuring Metrics

Ball finds it valuable to track what its social conversations are about between consumers so it can provide solutions that fit their specific needs. The critical question for the company, however, is how to develop a system of metrics to determine the effectiveness in dollars from such results (e.g. the number of hits from YouTube videos or counts of pictures consumers posted on Facebook and Pinterest).

Both Google Analytics and Facebook Insights can provide numbers on user views; however, this does not provide the company with much of an indicator because the user views also includes random clicks. Ball contends that Facebook does a better job for them as analytic tool. The Facebook Insights page provides more results that they are interested in, such as measuring how

many people are interacting with the posts and reposting, how many shares the posts get, how many accounts are involved in the interaction, and who are those people are. Also, at the retail level, companies can link QR codes and Microsoft tags to the products, enabling access to online content.

Managing online media posting

Lacking resources and people to manage company social media usage is a common issue across the industry and Ball is no exception. They do not currently have a social media manager that exclusively works on that aspect. Until such time, the company has to rely on recruiting talented interns to help or they use the expertise of outside agencies. Ball has at least 10 solid contributors for the consumer social media side and few more on the trade side.

One person in the marketing department at Ball Horticulture serves as a “Gate keeper” for the social media posts to make sure that the advertising messages that are broadcast out in Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are adhering to the rules. In some cases where there are multiple people involved, coordination while sending homogeneous messages is often difficult and sometimes “horror stories” for companies develop that end up negatively influencing their public image. Fortunately, this has not been the case for Ball, but the interaction between social media management staff and the end users can be troublesome during off-hours or weekends when most of consumers spend their time gardening.

However, Ball contends that it is important to remember that the ultimate objective in social media is promoting gardening knowledge – being a trusted resource for consumers. There is a fine line between providing enough information and being intrusive.

Privacy issues

The privacy issues generated by social media marketing are very real. Ball has set its privacy policy for its’ official home pages so that subscribers or users are required to provide their e-mail address for communication purposes and they are always presented an user agreement to sign off on.

As for the external social media websites, Ball primarily follows each of their privacy policies. Ball also has its legal team review on a case-by-case basis to ensure that their promotions activities online have fulfilled all legal requirements.

Recommendations regarding adopting social media

Based on Ball’s experience with social media instruments so far, the suggestions that the company gives to the retailing florists who want to start engaging in social media marketing can be summarized as follows:

- The first priority any business will be to create the optimal experience within the retailing environment itself and then try to recreate that environment through social media. Getting people to talk about what they have seen or what got them interested in flowers in the first place (e.g. an attractive floral arrangement or unique flower they saw on Pinterest).
- For small florists, Facebook and Pinterest can be a good option. Those social media platforms make it easy for anyone to create boards or pin their pictures, allowing companies either big or small, or even globally to engage with the end users and potential customers out there.
- Obviously, we are getting more and more mobile in terms of getting information from desktops to smartphones. It is important to make sure that the content the company created in the social media also can pass through the mobile environment. Fortunately, for existing social media instruments as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc, they have already developed apps that are tablet and mobile friendly. The mobile pages should provide key information upfront for the user such as contact information, brief descriptions of the flowers and plants, find local retailer/florist, etc. and leave other supporting information on desktop view of the website.