



## this marketing plan is easy to manage and gets results

Last time, I shared a marketing conversation that took place between a garden center owner, the retailer's ad agency and myself. The agency followed its typical playbook approach with little impact on the garden center's sales or customer count.

Here's an insider's tip on why agencies are so predictable: The plan they suggest clients follow isn't because the process works and actually has a chance to increase sales, it's because the process they live by is easy for the agency to manage. Getting every client to sign-up for the same media plan makes life easy for the agency and its staff - easy to sell, easy to create, easy to scale, easy to bill. Easy for the agency; a waste of time and money for you, the IGC retailer.

If you're placing your future in the hands of a generic advertising agency, this formula probably sounds familiar:

1. You need a new logo.
2. You need a new website.
3. Since e-mail is now considered blasé by younger generations, you must have digital clips for YouTube, social media and the new website.
4. Run full-color image ads in expensive life-style magazines, especially those "targeting" (agencies love that word) the high-income "female demographic" (another catchphrase).
5. Run gushy TV ads, filmed at the garden center, that show benches of color while bird sounds chirp away in the background and a sleepy voice-over swoons about how great the products are and how service-minded all the employees happen to be - focusing entirely on the garden center with little to no attention toward the customer. Make sure the ads run during expensive programs and network news stations targeting the much-desired female demographic.

6. Forget traditional radio, since they are just too many stations and everyone now listens to satellite radio.

7. Direct mail is old-fashioned and expensive, unless you want to pay exorbitant prices for a glossy mailer delivered a couple times a year.

And don't forget the counterintuitive belief adhered to by agencies and garden centers alike...

8. Make sure the vast majority of the marketing budget is spent during peak sales months.

There you have it. The standard, time-honored marketing sinkhole that ad agencies unleash on unsuspecting garden center owners - and, quite possibly, supported by the new in-house marketing manager hired to bring a fresh approach to the retailer's advertising plan.

### How To Do It

So what's a garden center to do when so many day-to-day issues are in need of attention, resulting in marketing decisions being made by people who are supposed to know what to do in order to get the most from a limited budget? In one word: plan.

Here's an alternative marketing process that is easy to manage, cost-effective and focused on sales results:

**1. Identify the most important message that will be delivered each week of the coming year.** The message could be focused on a product, event, garden tip or seminar. A meeting with your staff can quickly determine the main focus your marketing should take for any week of the year. When in doubt, check your POS history.

What's selling the most for any given week? Focusing on what customers want to buy is never a bad approach. This information drives each advertising message that gets created, regardless of how it's delivered.

**2. Begin with a process to communicate with the customers you already have.** Direct mail, social media and e-newsletters are all proven avenues for staying in touch with the customer base responsible for the vast majority of your sales, with one caveat - design and content matter a lot.

Keep it simple. Keep it focused. Keep it personal. Keep it scheduled. Speak to your customer with information important to your customer.

Here are a few guidelines to consider:

**E-newsletter** - The most important component is the opening letter, which should be written from the perspective of an actual

person, not coming from the company. Delivery should be weekly or at least bi-monthly on the same day at the same time. E-newsletters should be regarded as a communication tool, not simply another form of advertising sales.

**Direct Mail** - Jumbo full-color postcards carry amazing impact when focused on timely information, such as holidays, events and products. Old-fashioned? Maybe. Cost-effective? For sure. Hard to resist? When properly done, absolutely.

The best results come from consistency. Plan on six to eight postcard campaigns a year, sent to the top-spending customers from your POS data. Depending on the size of the garden center and budget, that could mean sending a few hundred for smaller garden centers and a few thousand for larger ones. Check purchasing levels from customer data. Customers spending well above your average sale are the ones deserving direct mail attention.

**Social Media** - This is probably the most time-pressured marketing option at hand, requiring constant attention to stay relevant and fresh. But you'll feel guilty if you're not participating in any or all social media options, so set expectations and guidelines for the person managing the process.

**3. Forget newspaper advertising - but not for the reasons you think.** Dropping newspaper ads from your marketing plan isn't due to the decrease in subscribers or an increase in pricing, it's due to the lack of emotion. Creating a message that connects on an emotional level, the magic behind every great ad, is difficult when delivered on a small scale in black and white. The cost of large ads in full color required for creating that emotional connection is out of reach by most garden center budgets. And garden centers with enough budget dollars can put those dollars to better use in different ways.

---

*Robert Hendrickson is Business Story Developer for Next New Planet and Marketing Service Provider for The Garden Center Group. He may be reached via e-mail at: robert@nextnewplanet.com.*