



"Proper Marketing Is Not As Difficult As You Might Believe"

by Robert Hendrickson

Last time I shared a marketing conversation that took place between a garden center owner, their ad agency and myself. The agency had been following their 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. Get every client to sign-on to the same media plan makes life easy for the agency and their staff. Easy to sell, easy to create, easy to scale, easy to bill. Easy for the agency. A waste of time and money for the retailer.

If you happen to be placing your future in the hands of a generic advertising agency, this formula probably sounds familiar...

1. The client always needs a new logo.
2. The client always needs a new website.
3. Since email is now considered blasé by younger generations, create digital clips for You Tube, social media and the new website.
4. Run full-color image ads in expensive lifestyle magazines, especially ones targeting the high-income, female demographic.
5. Run gushy television 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 how great the products are and how service-minded all the employees happen to be, focused entirely on the garden center with little to no attention toward the customer. Make sure the ads are placed on programs "targeting" (agencies love the word) the much desired, "female demographic" (another agency catchphrase) and expensive network news programs. Oh, and don't forget the Jeopardy/Wheel of Fortune

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hour... after Ellen and Lifetime, the go-to position of every garden center's TV campaign during the spring.

6. Forget traditional radio since they're just too many stations and everyone now listens to satellite radio anyway.

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

And don't forget the counter-intuitive 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 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 garden center's advertising plan.

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 sales results focused.

1. Identify the most important message to be delivered each week of the coming year.

The message could be focused on a product, an event, garden tip or seminar. A meeting with the staff can quickly determine the main focus 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. Do a great job on step one and you'll be amazed how well your advertising works.

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2. Begin with a process to communicate with the customers you already have.

Direct mail, social media and email 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 the customer with information important to the customer.

Here are a few guidelines to consider...

Email Newsletter - The most important component is the opening letter from the perspective of an actual person, not something coming from "the company". Delivery should be weekly or at least bi-monthly on the same day at the same time. Enewsletters 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 timely products. Old-fashioned? Maybe. Cost effective? For sure. Hard to resist? When properly done, absolutely. And anything worth doing is worth doing often. 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 the size of the budget, that could mean sending a few hundred for smaller centers and a few thousand for larger ones. Check spending levels from customer data. Customers spending well above your average sale are ones deserving direct mail attention.

Social Media - Probably the most time pressured marketing option at hand, requiring constant attention to stay relevant and fresh. If someone on staff has the time, it can be useful for relaying timely information. Until posting becomes stale or too self-serving. But you'll feel guilty if you're not participating in any or all social media options so set expectations and guidelines for whoever is managing the process.

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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 accompanied by an increase in pricing. It's more due to the lack of emotion. Creating a message that connects on an emotional level, the magic behind every great ad, is difficult when being 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 for most garden center budgets. Garden centers with enough budget dollars can put those dollars to better use in different ways.

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