

## **Electronic Marketing for the Garden Center** **By Bob & Susan Negen**

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Let me just get straight to the point: electronic marketing is the perfect marketing tool for independent garden centers. It is an incredibly cost effective way to increase customer loyalty, increase the number of transactions you get from each of your customers, and it's an effective way to get new customers also.

Before we go any farther let me define electronic marketing: electronic marketing is using a web site and/or e-mail to market your business. Each can be done independently, but later in this article I'll explain why they go together like Aunt Jemima pancakes and her syrup.

First let's talk about web sites, because Internet technology is here to stay: hoping that it will go away or choosing to ignore it is plain foolish. Every day new advancements are making the Internet easier to use and therefore it's increasingly important that you have a web site and are using it effectively. Here are two important examples.

### **Broadband technology**

You don't really need to know what "broadband" is – all you need to know is that it's making surfing the web and buying online much faster and easier for almost all users. No more waiting around for pictures to load or orders to process.

Because it's so quick and easy, more people are going to check you out online – for store hours, location, customer service questions – than ever before. If you don't have a web site, or if you have a site that doesn't market your business well, you are missing out big time.

### **Local search**

I doubt that the Yellow Pages book will be around in 20 years. Here's why. Most of the popular Internet search providers now have a feature that lets people search for products and services right in their own neighborhoods by typing in what they are looking for and then their zip code.

The first listing when you do this search says "Local results for XYZ products near your town name." When you click it, local businesses with web sites that offer the product or service you're looking for are listed. I suggest you try it. Go to Google or Yahoo and type in garden centers and then your zip code. This is what savvy shoppers are doing when they are searching for a product or service and they aren't sure where to go. Based on your quick search, are they coming into your garden center or going down the road to a competitor, or worse yet, going to a big box store?

### **The Truth About Web Sites**

Regardless of what the techies and web gurus say, as a small business your web site isn't going to bring you hoards of new customers, let you compete with the "big boys" in your industries, or make you rich. It's just not true.

What your web site can and should do, however, is be a wonderful tool **to market to your existing customers and hottest prospects.** More and more customers are going to go online to find out your store hours, if you're open on Sunday, if you carry a brand of products they are looking for, what's new at the store this month, or even what your phone number is.

Every business should have at least a “brochure” type web site with three to seven pages about their business. It’s just good customer service. If you’re not making it easy to shop with you, your customers will eventually go elsewhere.

Which brings us to the very interesting subject of how to get people to visit your site in the first place.

### **The “If You Build It, They Will Come” Myth - Revisited**

Just like opening the doors to your store and doing little marketing, merely creating a web site and doing nothing to entice people in will get you very few visitors. There are lots of search engine optimization strategies and fancy marketing maneuvers you can do to drive traffic to your web site, but these are not usually tactics that are feasible for small business owners.

The best, easiest, most sure-fire way to get your customers to visit your site is to use e-mail marketing. This e-marketing strategy is so important, easy, and inexpensive that I think everyone – especially garden centers – ought to be doing it!

E-mail marketing is quite simply the cheapest, easiest, and fastest way to stay in touch with your customers. Here’s why.

- **It’s Cheap**

Almost any message you decide to send to your customers via snail mail can also be sent via e-mail – and you avoid the printing, materials and postage costs. It’s definitely a big savings.

- **It’s Easy**

Sending an e-mail is easier than sending regular mail, too. You don't have all the hassle of designing, printing, stuffing, stamping, and hauling. All you do is write your message and click send.

- **It's Fast**

No more waiting around for the postman to deliver your letter. When you send it, it gets there immediately. This is great if you have time-sensitive offers, like a special price only good through the end of next week.

### **Big Bonus!**

Here's one of the biggest plusses with e-mail – you customer has an easy and immediate way to respond to you. All they have to do is hit reply or click a link to your web site. They don't have to decide to pick up the phone; they don't have to put anything in the mail; and they don't have to wait for regular business hours. Making it easy for your customer to do business with you is very important.

All this adds up to one thing: you can – and are much more likely to – communicate frequently with your customers and build great “Top Of Mind Awareness.” As a result, you'll get stronger, deeper, better customer relationships.

The most important thing you can do right now – even if you don't want to use this tool immediately – is to **start gathering the e-mail addresses of every customer, every prospect, and every professional contact you have.** That way, when you want to start using this tool later, you'll have a list of addresses ready to go.

## **What can E-marketing do for you?**

### **Notify your customers about sales, special events, and promotions**

In fact, if you really want to push an event, you can send a series of e-mails to promote it. The first would be a “mark it on your calendar” message about four weeks out, then a “don’t forget” reminder about 10 days out, and finally a “it’s happening this weekend” reminder a day or two before the event. Every event doesn’t warrant a series of e-mails but your major events certainly do.

### **Generate immediate interest in your products or services**

During the shoulder seasons, or if you get a big order of new items in, send an e-mail and fill your store fast. These types of messages are generally more “off-the-cuff” but can still be very successful. There are two tricks:

First make sure your message puts the “Law of Scarcity” into play (“one day only”... or “for the first 27 customers”... or “just three more ultra widgets left”). This makes taking action an urgent priority. The second is to give them a special offer if they do take action quickly.

This example does both: “My pain is your gain – UPS dropped off 47 boxes of new holiday decorations today, and I don’t have quite enough room for all these beautiful garden gifts in the store. So to make extra room, I’m offering you a special two-day deal. On these two days ONLY, get 25 percent off any purchase in the store, plus I’ll throw in a bottle of tree preserver (\$11.95 value) as a special thank you.”

### **Time Sensitive Offers**

E-mail messages are very effective for perishable items like plants and flowers or for any weekly/daily specials that are only available for a short period. If you have a weekly plant special, e-mail your list the day before it arrives to generate interest and remind people to stop in. You could even send a picture of the plant in the body of the e-mail!

### **Inform your customers about changes that affect them**

If you hire a new landscape designer, let your customers know. If your fax number changes, blast out an e-mail. If you change your store hours, get the word out. It's important information – plus it's one more communication from you that keeps your name at the top of your customer's mind. Also if you ever plan on moving, having a solid list of your customers e-mail addresses allows you to make the move with minimal interruption to your customer base. If you can't notify them of what's happening you, will surely lose them with your move.

### **Establish yourself as the expert**

E-mail is a great format for sending out a weekly or monthly tip, article, or idea – something that will position you in the mind of your customer as an “expert.” Try a “Great Gardening Tips From your garden center.” Give your customers valuable gardening information that makes them want to read your newsletter and keeps your company name in front of them. This type of regular communication reinforces your position as the expert and helps to keep your customers loyal. Note that this kind of message is not exactly like a newsletter – these should be short and have one simple point. Do not try to do too much.

Short, sweet, and often, is the name of the game. Several garden center owners who participate in my Marketing Mentor Program send out a short, weekly tip with great success. Their customers love it!

### **Drive customers to your web site**

This is the best way for small businesses to drive customers to their web site to buy products or book appointments. In the text of your e-mail message, just include a link with an invitation to get more information on your web site. Like this: “Just click here [www.yourwebsite.com](http://www.yourwebsite.com) for complete information about next Tuesday’s Pond Seminar.”

Your link can go to the home page on your web site or directly to a specific page that relates to the message. If you’re not sure how to put a link in your e-mail or don’t know how to make a word or image a “hyperlink”, ask.

You should try to include a link to your web site in every e-mail you send. Get your customers used to visiting your site frequently! The more they come to your site the more they will use you, and you alone, as their source for plants, growing materials, and their other gardening needs.

This strategy of building your customer e-mail list as actively as possible, sending a short, informative e-mail every week, and having an information-rich, customer-friendly web site can take the place of thousands of dollars in traditional media advertising.

Using this strategy of getting the absolute most from every one of your existing customers through electronic marketing diminishes your need to constantly find new customers through advertising. It adds up to more loyal customers, more efficient marketing, and more money in your bank account.

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