



Digital Marketing 101

In this last column of our value-added series, we look at how social media can boost your value-add project

By Helen Lammers-Helps



Anyone can tell you (in fact, they probably already have, more than once) that the Internet is too powerful a tool to ignore for marketing your value-added products. But exactly how can you harness its potential to reach your own goals?

When creating an online presence, Nigel Gordijk, owner of Common Sense Design in New Hamburg, Ont., aims to develop a website using a content management system which allows his clients to update it themselves.

This way, the client can keep it relevant without the added expense of going back to the website designer for changes every time, explains Gordijk, who specializes in marketing for small and medium businesses, many of them agricultural.

Gordijk also recommends you develop a conversational tone in your writing that is more friendly and engaging than corporate-speak. “Just imagine you are speaking to the person in front of you,” he advises.

People do business with people, Gordijk emphasizes, so he recommends farmers profile the people involved in making the product. “It gives a genuine sense of the unique character and personality,” he says. People buy at supermarkets for the convenience, but they buy direct from the producer for the farm connection, so include information on the care and attention to detail that goes into the product. Many consumers appreciate the labour of love involved in farming, says Gordijk.

Testimonials by satisfied customers are very effective too, Gordijk adds. “Third-party feedback always has more credibility than a sales pitch. After all, these are people who have given you their money.”

If you are actively involved in your community, celebrate this on your farm website, says Gordijk. “This creates a sense of goodwill and encourages others to participate as well,” he says.

Don’t forget to let people know how to reach you, especially including a good map. Gordijk says you can add a vicinity search engine to a website so people on the go can find you.

On the technical side, make sure your website works with different-size screens, including smart-

phones. If your customers are out driving around and decide they want to pick up some farm-fresh strawberries, make sure they can find you.

And remember that your website is never done, adds Gordijk. “Launch with the basic information and then build on it over time,” he says.

Cindy Wilhelm, owner of Dragonfly Garden Farm in Chatsworth, Ont. says her website includes their farm philosophy and business hours. “This saves me explaining to each customer why our farm is wonderful,” she says. Her website also has an online store which is important for generating sales. Wilhelm says her e-newsletter is one of her main sales tools.

But a website should rarely be your only e-tactic. Consider social media too, with their online platforms for sharing opinions, experiences and other content. Here, your goal will be to create content for others to respond to, explains Dr. Andreas Boecker, a professor in food, agriculture and resource economics at the University of Guelph. These platforms include but are not limited to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, blogs and Instagram and can be used in conjunction with your website. For example, you could use a YouTube video to demonstrate how you make your cheese.

Canadians are among the most active users of social media, and at present the two most important social media platforms are Facebook and Twitter. Your market will determine which one is most important to your business, says Gordijk. Twitter users tend to be younger and Facebook users tend to be older, explains Gordijk. Although things can shift rapidly in the online world, Facebook currently has 1.32 billion users worldwide and is most popular in the 35 to 54 age group. On the other hand, Twitter which has 271 million users is most commonly used by those aged 18 to 29.

When it comes to social media, Gordijk advises that you should avoid bombarding your followers with sales information. Think of it as cultivating a community instead, he says. “You can be a source of information on the industry,” says Gordijk who emphasizes the need for patience. “You won’t build an audience overnight.”

One of the advantages of social media is the opportunity to engage your customers and create a two-way conversation.

Consider encouraging participation by sponsoring contests. For example, Cambridge asparagus grower, Tim Barrie, hosts a “guess the first day of asparagus harvest” contest every spring.

Before creating a social media account, it’s important to understand what you are trying to accomplish. It should be part of a larger marketing strategy. Whichever social media channels you choose to use, designate someone who is passionate about your business to be in charge of it. It’s important to be adding fresh content on a regular basis.

Use photos as much as possible. It’s OK to use your smartphone to take pictures. “People know you are a small business and expect a certain amount of spontaneity,” says Gordijk.

Murphy’s Bakery near Alliston, Ont. has been very successful using social media. They take pictures of their cupcakes or pumpkin pies using an iPhone and then post them to Facebook. Many of the people coming in to buy them say they came because they saw the photos on Facebook.

Meghan Snyder, co-owner of Snyders Family Farm near Ayr, Ont. says Facebook is a very important marketing tool for their family-focused daytime activities. However, they also run a Halloween-themed Fear Farm at night, and for that market, Twitter is more important, she says.

Having Facebook and Twitter accounts is essential, says Snyder. “It’s equivalent to having a Yellow Pages ad back in the ’90s,” she says. In addition to Facebook and Twitter, Snyder uses Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube, but she admits she struggles to tap into the full power of social media. “It takes time away from other work, but I think it’s important,” she says.

Social media is just one marketing tool that Snyder uses. Others include networking, word of mouth, and print advertising. Snyder also buys ads on Facebook and will likely buy ads on Twitter this fall. She sponsors events which she promotes through her social media channels.

“Cool posts, contests, great images and social media take most of the money I used to use for print advertising,” Snyder says. “I still do a lot of radio though.” **CG**

GET MORE FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

If you’re new to social media, you’ve got some learning to do. But it isn’t that tough. To begin, just “listen” in on a social media channel for a while to get a feel for it before you post.

Also check out books, even if it sounds counterintuitive to buy a paper book to learn about paperless communication. A good place to start is UNMARKETING by Scott Stratten (John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2010), although of course you can also check out Stratten’s website at www.un-marketing.com.

Even when you begin posting, recognize that you will need to continue to learn. When it comes to Twitter, for instance, try posting at different times of day to see what time is most effective. Then repeat your tweets for greater effectiveness.

“Think of it like showing a car commercial,” says Nigel Gordijk of Common Sense Design. Not everyone is on at the same time, so you need to show it more than once.

Use separate accounts for personal and business social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Keep it positive. For example, don’t complain about the problems you are having getting a building permit from the municipality. And don’t bash the competition.

Use photos as much as possible.

Also let your customers know when you are at an event and invite them to come and visit you.

To build a following, follow others in your industry. They may follow you back.

And don’t be afraid to make mistakes. Social media is more forgiving if your language isn’t perfect, but avoid the overuse of exclamation points. “Don’t use three exclamation points when one will do,” says Gordijk.



“If it weren’t for the messages from some of the leaders I connected with, I wouldn’t have this clear vision nor the motivation to go after it. I can’t thank you enough for that.”

– Jen C., Ontario, 2014 AWC Delegate

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