



# Growing Success in a Digital World

*Pandemic or not, technology has been impacting the way we interact with one another and operate our businesses.*

**BY JASMINA DOLCE**

While the horticulture industry has been relatively slow to implement many digital offerings, there's no question that now is the time to become acquainted with new technology and resources — if we aren't already. As many businesses turn to the web to sell and interact with customers, employees and the general public, we recently discussed these issues with Allison Pennell, horticultural copywriter with Everbearing Services, a firm that provides services that help build web presence for its clients.

**GPN: COVID-19 has certainly introduced a unique challenge to businesses of all types. How do you feel greenhouse growers have been affected?**

**Allison Pennell:** Where I live in Oregon, we actually experienced a huge boost this spring with many people discovering, or rediscovering, their love of gardening. It's wonderful to see an increase in demand for plants. I would caution growers that a season like this may not be replicated in 2021, so capturing your customers' attention and building your base of customers now is so important. Increase your reach prior to an economic downturn as many new garden customers will resume tourism and travel once the pandemic risk is resolved.

Growers are so adaptable and different operations changed their logistics and sales strategies to adapt to the pandemic. A major challenge was supply chain disruption between states, because of the different grower locations and a variety of state orders related to the pandemic. There were so many unknowns at the beginning of the pandemic, but the industry really made the best of it.

**GPN: Establishing a digital presence is top of mind to many growers now. What are the various opportunities available to growers wanting to increase their digital presence?**

**AP:** Having a website to take orders and make sales is a critical business tool. The pandemic is a great example because growers with a strong digital presence could quickly adapt to reach customers. Growers can capture their customers' attention by sharing authoritative information on the plant material they supply.

Having a blog is a great way to regularly reach customers by providing them information they want to receive. It helps as a sales tool because it's not the same message and is helpful. It sets your business apart as an authority on plant information, which makes you a resource for them.

Creating a content plan to provide the same type of information throughout digital channels: Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest can help you reach many audiences and establish your brand. It also gives you more ways to provide the information piece, which will help your customers remember you and differentiate your business from the competition.

**GPN: What are some guidelines to follow when creating a (or making over an existing) website for a grower operation?**

**AP:** The first step is actually not creating a website. The first three things growers can do at no cost is setting up a Google My Business account, a business page in Bing Places and a Yelp page. New businesses can set up those basics for free. We also provide this service for new customers at an affordable rate.

Google My Business has a website builder; 40% of online visibility is determined by your business location and being searchable on Google and Bing maps. It is basically an online business card so that you can get found online.

A website is important, though. Posting a current plant availability is also a good idea; it saves your staff time going over requests for plants that aren't in production. It saves you time fielding phone calls or emails when you clearly have what you supply available on the website. You can also set these up to be password protected to ensure only quality customers can view your inventory.

Don't forget that this is a sales tool, and make it very clear where they enter and how to order. Include a "Call to Action" on most of your pages so that, again, no one is having to search very long. You never know at exactly what point they will go from information gathering to making a buying decision, so set it up to be easy for them to make the order with you.

**GPN: What are some mobile marketing techniques that growers can implement?**

**AP:** Making sure your website is easily viewed on mobile devices is so important. Most horticulture professionals are multitasking in the field, greenhouse and with customers. You can't always be in an office at a desktop. More and more work is done via smartphones so make your website mobile compatible, and it will already give you a boost over competition.

Even email is often viewed from a phone's screen, so making the information you send via newsletters or blogs is easy to scan and with some catching photos engages people.

**GPN: Can growers successfully sell their product online? What steps need to be taken, and what should they consider before creating an online sales strategy?**

**AP:** Yes, and this has become hugely successful during the pandemic. The first thing to consider is what products you want to start shipping. Not all plant material lends itself well to shipping, although there are so many innovative materials available. Plants are dynamic — heat, water and light considerations are unique to shipping living plant material.

After you have your inventory, you can determine where you want to sell. Many growers have had success using e-commerce via Etsy, eBay or creating Amazon stores, but each platform has its own requirements for layout, photographs and fees to consider. You have to decide if you want to use an established e-commerce site or set up your own online shopping

cart that's unique to your website.

Many greenhouse growers begin a retail or shipping program in the off- or pre-season. By shipping seeds, dormant plants, liners or plugs, it reduces the cost of shipping and the potential impact it has on plants.

**GPN: Let's talk social media. How can growers utilize various social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, etc.?**

**AP:** Growers have a clear advantage when it comes to social media; they grow a beautiful product and pictures are far more engaging than text when it comes to social media. Hashtags are an excellent way to help new people find your company's photos, especially on Instagram. A hashtag is a simple phrase that highlights what you are capturing in the photo. These are uber popular with houseplant growers, just search #monsteramondays or #helloplantlover and you'll see a huge community of plant enthusiasts showing off their green thumbs and plants.

This is also where a content plan really helps you stay on top of things and avoid being overwhelmed. You can pre-schedule posts so you don't fall behind and use a tool that gives you a coordinated posting between multiple sites.

**GPN: Tell me about Everbearing Services. What services do you offer, and do you have any client success stories?**

**AP:** Everbearing Services helps build all types of websites, but we also measure the effectiveness as we work with you. We are a digital marketing agency, but what is so unique is that we specialize in horticulture. Our goal is always to be helpful and simplify the process for our clients. We develop your site so that you get qualified leads that become new customers. We can create content strategies and manage or oversee your communication with customers.

We have a great success story with a wholesale greenhouse grower. Everbearing set up an online shopping cart to sell online to new retail customers. It has become hugely successful for them and

was even further boosted during the stay-at-home order. Customers were so happy to be able to order plants and have them delivered straight to their home.

Concurrent to developing the client's online shopping cart, we included a shipping module integrated into the website.

We integrated their accounting system and inventory so they always have accurate inventory as orders come in.

This simplified their shipping processes, saving time, personnel headaches and shipping costs. When they have a new order come in, the system produces a

procedure document that includes what box and packaging material will be required to process the unique order. Having this within the website has been a valuable tool and made the direct-to-customer shipping process much easier to integrate into their overall wholesale operation. **gpn**

## The world's purest water-soluble fertilizer



# Peters®

Only the highest-quality ingredients are used to make Peters water-soluble fertilizer. Clean, clear formulations result in total solubility, reducing labor and product costs by eliminating precipitate build-up, clogged emitters, and repeated applications. Our exclusive M-77 chelating formula provides the vital nutrients, trace elements and efficient uptake needed for outstanding quality and brilliant color. Contact ICL today to learn more about Peters—the clear choice in water-soluble fertilizer.

**ICL** Specialty Fertilizers

[growwithpeters.com](http://growwithpeters.com)