



# VIRTUAL REALITY

## Gains New Meaning

*How can growers cultivate new consumers in uncertain times?*

**BY AMANDA HUNTINGTON**

If we rewind to a year ago, virtual reality was defined by computer-generated simulation. Today, it's unfortunately defined by coronavirus. Granted the e-commerce channel has rapidly been growing over the past five years, and no one is oblivious to the fact that Amazon has paved the way to the new norm of shopping, but since COVID-19 came stateside, the want of shopping online has transitioned to more of a need. Those days of perusing shopping malls have transformed to sitting in front of a computer screen, reading reviews and clicking "order now" with the mindset your purchase will be at your front door within a two-day shipping window.

While there is still a need to supply retailers with live goods to fill their garden centers, retailers have expanded their focus to online marketplaces to trial programs and prove their success, fulfill the needs of consumers, and, of course, increase their total sales. The pandemic at hand has inspired a new generation of gardeners and has re-inspired those with a passion for gardening. In turn, the greatest spike in sales in 2020, compared to 2019, has in fact been the e-commerce channel.

### LEVERAGING OPPORTUNITY

Gardening is good for the soul, therapeutic and delivers instant gratification. When we're living in a world of "stay at home," "social distance" and "shelter in place" orders, home gardening climbs to the top of the activity list. As a grower, there's an opportunity to leverage the e-commerce channel, whether independently or through your retail partnerships.

The question remains: how do growers tackle e-commerce successfully? And, if given the opportunity to supply directly to consumers, in a channel and category that has grown immensely since COVID-19 started, growers need to set the consumers up for success.

This starts with developing a strategy. A majority of growers who sell through an e-commerce channel use this arm as an extension of their business as opposed to their core. Chances are, they're already a primary supplier or striving to be one, and if there isn't a direct relationship, they're supporting other growers through contract grow

relationships — which means the variety of inputs being supplied is quite extensive.

### STAND OUT WITH INNOVATION

While it might be ideal to take what you're producing for in-store distribution and duplicating those items online, that transition isn't always seamless. The decision-making analysis of an in-store shopper might differ than that of a consumer sitting behind a screen. The time it takes a consumer to decide whether or not to make the purchase might be altered based on the setting.

The competitiveness increases immensely once you navigate to the virtual world. Think of how many items you can search for on Amazon. How many different competitive products do you come across in your search? My guess is, quite a few. Now think of what grabs your attention when it comes to an item online — cost, packaging, reviews and the shipping window jump to the top of the list.

Growers have an opportunity to stand out in an oversaturated virtual market and, instead of being the supplier, showcase through innovation. In an effort to distinguish yourself, find your niche. As a grower, you don't need to supply all things to everyone. Would it be nice? Sure. Would it be challenging? Most likely. The cliché statement of "quality versus quantity" rings true here. If you can identify those items you produce well per season, focus on superior and consistent quality, and vet the programs that will hold up in two-day shipping, the e-commerce channel might be worth exploring.

When navigating these waters and selling through a retail partner's online channel, keep the following in mind. Not only do you have to uphold the standards of the retailer (i.e., plant height, covered rim, in-bloom), but as the grower, set your standards as well. Instead of positioning yourself from a sales pitch perspective, position yourself as the need to consumers.

### EXPLORE BRANDING

Brand loyalty is a driving factor when it comes to demand and successful sell through. Proven Winners, Monrovia, Knock Out Roses

and Wave petunias are a few brands that need no introduction. They've built their brands through multiple channels, deliver high-quality product, and have grown their success through recognition and the positive connotation that comes with their names. In times of uncertainty, branding is the driving force. They are known. They are trusted. Brands communicate with consumers and listen to what they have to say, and what they need and want.

There's no need to reinvent the wheel. Through research, strategic thinking and development, growers can use these tools to execute. Align yourself with like-minded individuals; those who complete a piece of your e-commerce puzzle. Selling via e-commerce gives you, the grower, the control — the control to determine the item, how it's packaged, the cost, what's included and how it's shipped. With every box checked, the most important factor, next to quality, is customer satisfaction. Creating the experience and interaction with the shopper virtually, while it may be challenging, builds your brand, supports growth, initiates word-of-mouth advertising, turns repeat business and builds the relationship.

**SET THE CONSUMER UP FOR SUCCESS**

In support of your brand, it is imperative to give consumers the tools they need to be successful at home. Proper tagging with growing details, as well as water and light instructions are imperative. Do not ship a plant without any information. That's setting the consumer up for failure, and quite frankly, yourself as well. Consider including additional literature, a QR code they can scan to learn more about the plant, other plant suggestions based on their purchase, or maybe an opportunity to purchase one as a gift for a discounted price. Think of how restaurants have shifted their table service. Based on what I've observed, many restaurants aren't handing out menus. They're

providing a card on the table and directing us to (yes, you guessed it!) use our smartphones to scan and be redirected.

Let's take the challenge at hand and learn from it; use it to your advantage. Consumers want to garden. They want to get some

of that control back. They want to feel confident in their purchase. As I've stated before, growers have the power to influence the market, set new trends and communicate with consumers, even if it is virtually. Let's just call it cultivating through COVID-19. [gpn](#)

*Amanda Huntington is director of Rooted Partners, a multi-level marketing and sales company helping bridge the gap and establish partnerships between growers and retailers. She can be reached at [ahuntington@rooted.partners](mailto:ahuntington@rooted.partners).*



John enjoys a hike with friends while his Autofog treats his greenhouse.

**What will you do with the time the AutoFog saves you?**



# AutoFog

Spraying made automatic, safe & effective



Small



Medium



Large



Extra Large



Scan Code for video & more information

**Automatically apply insecticides, fungicides, and bio-rationals. Dramm has an AutoFog for every size greenhouse.**

**Call to find out which one is right for you.**

**DRAMM**  
Integrated Plant Health

[information@dramm.com](mailto:information@dramm.com)  
[www.dramm.com](http://www.dramm.com)  
920.684.0227