

# Marketing with More: An In-depth Look at Relationship Marketing with New Media in the Green Industry

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## Abstract

Garden-center businesses have unique challenges related to the marketing of products. New and social media offer a way for garden-center operators to connect with customers and market products online in an effort to compete with box stores. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how some garden-center businesses use social media and email marketing to build relationships with customers. Findings from eight in-depth interviews indicate garden-center stakeholders believe they are practicing relationship marketing through their e-newsletter and Facebook accounts. However, strategic planning is limited to an e-newsletter, marketing efforts show characteristics of one-way communication, and strategic measurement is absent. Lack of measurement could hinder the formation of profitable relationships. Owners, employees, and customers place high importance on educational content shared via social networks, but view advertising through new media differently. It is recommended garden-center owners and employees implement relationship-marketing techniques based on strategic measurement and planning to produce loyal brand advocates.

## Keywords

Case study, Green Industry, New-media Marketing, Relationship Marketing, Social-Media Marketing

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# RESEARCH

## Marketing with More: An In-depth Look at Relationship Marketing with New Media in the Green Industry

Scott Stebner, Lauri M. Baker, Hikaru Hanawa Peterson, and Cheryl R. Boyer

### ABSTRACT

*Garden-center businesses have unique challenges related to the marketing of products. New and social media offer a way for garden-center operators to connect with customers and market products online in an effort to compete with box stores. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how some garden-center businesses use social media and email marketing to build relationships with customers. Findings from eight in-depth interviews indicate garden-center stakeholders believe they are practicing relationship marketing through their e-newsletter and Facebook accounts. However, strategic planning is limited to an e-newsletter, marketing efforts show characteristics of one-way communication, and strategic measurement is absent. Lack of measurement could hinder the formation of profitable relationships. Owners, employees, and customers place high importance on educational content shared via social networks, but view advertising through new media differently. It is recommended garden-center owners and employees implement relationship-marketing techniques based on strategic measurement and planning to produce loyal brand advocates.*

### KEY WORDS

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### INTRODUCTION

Ornamental plants are a unique market within the agricultural industry. The relative number of consumer purchases are low, unlike food purchases, which provides challenges for garden-center marketing, (Palma, Hall, & Collart, 2011). Therefore, keeping customers involved and motivated to buy ornamental plants is pivotal to garden-center businesses (Hodges, Hall, & Palma, 2011). Dissatisfying gardening experiences by homeowners in past purchases cause them to be wary of new purchases, and their lack of knowledge often hinders future purchasing potential, serving as a barrier to garden-center profit (Niemi, Innis-Smith, & Leda, 1993). These experiences may lead to decreased satisfaction of consumers, which impacts repeat buying decisions. Thus, garden-center owners should place more emphasis on educating and delighting their customer base (Hicks, Page, Behe, & Fernand, 2005). As part of the marketing process, Behe and Barton (2000) suggest garden-center staff should seek out the opinions of their customers to ascertain the level of service (and delight) they are providing.

Social media is one way a company can communicate directly with a target audience while allowing customers to communicate with other customers. For this reason, social media is considered a hybrid-marketing tool (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) through which businesses gather essential information about consumers to differentiate and market products while reducing advertising expenditures (Bolataeva & Cata, 2011). Such benefits can be "especially advantageous for smaller to medium-sized firms in the consumer products and services industry, which often lack the resources necessary for employing traditional forms of advertising" (Castronovo & Huang, 2012, p. 117).

## **MEASURING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL-MEDIA CAMPAIGNS**

The long-term impacts of a social-media marketing program are not always immediately measurable (Yue, Dennis, Behe, Hall, Campbell, & Lopez, 2011), because it consists of multiple channels with many influences (Fagerstrom & Ghina, 2013). Measurement tools have been slowly advancing (Duncan, 2010) to quantify the ability of social media to generate positive buzz, increase awareness, increase sales, or increase loyalty (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). The current benchmark for measuring generated buzz and awareness on social media is engagement, which is generally viewed as “a visitor taking some action beyond viewing or reading...commenting, registering, downloading, retweeting, and so on” (Paine, 2011, p. 60). The level of engagement on social media indicates the consumers’ level of interest in the online presence of the organization. Therefore, engagement is an important first step in building a relationship between customers and a brand (Paine, 2011). Tracking and measuring engagement levels can help identify if businesses are listening to customers or simply communicating in a one-way dialogue (Paine, 2011).

### **Email Marketing**

Another way for companies to engage with customers is through email marketing. Castronovo and Huang (2010) stated email can be an invaluable tool in customer relationship management, and offer firms straightforward and cost effective ways to acquire customers and strengthen customer relationships (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2003). Marketers can also use email to reach out to customers, build a stronger brand identity, and increase customer loyalty. Effectiveness of email campaigns can be measured in terms of its delivery and open rates, link clicks, and brand website traffic (Castronovo & Huang, 2010). Newsletters that are sent via email are called “e-newsletters, [and] work by providing information that is relevant to a targeted audience” (Baggot, 2011, p. 166). Subscribers to a business’ e-newsletter enter a social transaction where they offer their email address in exchange for valuable or interesting content. In doing so, a firm is viewed as generous and trustworthy, resulting in increased loyalty (Baggot, 2011).

### **Relationship Management Theory**

Theoretical principles of relationship management theory served as a conceptual framework for this study. Ledingham and Bruning (2000) recommend organizations approach public relations as a two-way symmetrical approach “that emphasizes building and maintaining relationships” (p. 65). In 2003, Ledingham further developed a framework for public relations that incorporated four key relational perspectives: 1) recognizing the pivotal role relationships play in public relationships; 2) viewing public relations as management of relationships; 3) identifying various types of public relationships with organizations and its influential characteristics; and 4) the construction of models for organization-public relationships that leave room for relationships, their processes, and the positive and negative consequences of those relationships. Measurement of key components of consumer relationships include the ability to influence each other, trust and integrity, satisfaction, mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationships, and concern for each other’s wellbeing. A symbiotic relationship built on shared concern for each party is the pinnacle of relationship marketing. Measurement tools must be used in order to obtain this level of relationship with consumers (Paine, 2011).

## **PURPOSE AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

While social-media marketing and email marketing have been studied in other industries, there is a gap in knowledge related to how these marketing tools are used in garden centers. This study sought to understand how some garden-center businesses use social media and email marketing to build a relationship with customers. For the purpose of this study, we used the term “new media” to describe social media and email marketing as one variable of interest. The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: How are selected garden-center employees and owners using new media to build relationships with customers?
- RQ2: How are garden-center customers engaging with new-media content?

## METHODS

The method of data collection for this exploratory study was in-depth, semi-structured interviews, because these are an effective method for gaining an increased understanding of participants' experiences (deMarrais, 2004). This study is classified as a case study, in that it is an in-depth look at the experiences of the participants in this study. It is not meant to generalize, but to understand the feelings and perceptions of those involved in the study (Yin, 2012). For the purpose of a case study, there is no minimum of participants needed, as it is a look at the experiences of those under investigation. In-depth interviews, by nature, allow the researcher a framework or structure to conduct the interview with the freedom to explore relevant issues to the participant (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). Based on the recommendations of Creswell (2007), Flick (2009), and Krueger (1998), the interviews were guided by the following principles: lasted 60 to 90 minutes in length; consisted of open-ended questions; used increased specificity as the interview progressed; and followed the opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending principles. Questions were initially broad in scope and narrow in specificity, because a researcher "should ask unstructured questions first and introduce increased structuring only later during the interview to prevent the interviewer's frame of reference being imposed on the interviewee's viewpoints" (Flick, 2009, p. 151). All questions and designed prompts were evaluated and approved by a panel of experts for face validity. The panel included a state Cooperative Extension specialist focused on ornamental crop production and garden centers, a professor in agricultural economics, an associate professor of agricultural communications, and an endowed chair in business administration who focuses on relationship marketing.

A purposively selected list of 23 garden centers was generated by a state Extension specialist with expert knowledge of existing Kansas garden centers. Facebook engagement rate was used to identify high performing and low performing garden centers on Facebook. This method was used because previous work in this area indicated engagement should be the key metric used to evaluate consumers' interaction and the establishment of a relationship with the business (Paine, 2011). In order to accurately measure and compare the engagement rate of one Facebook page to another, Smitha's (2013) formula was used which is:  $\text{engagement} = (\text{likes} + \text{comments} + \text{shares}) / \text{total fans}$ . The engagement rates were averaged over the previous 60 days and metro and non-metro garden centers were ranked from highest to lowest. This resulted in a sample of four garden centers with one metro and one non-metro garden center performing at or above average in Facebook marketing and one metro and one non-metro garden center performing below average (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Garden-Center Characteristics*

Store	Description	New Media
A	Garden center A is family owned and located in rural Northwest Kansas. There are two other garden center locations in Nebraska. In addition to offering retail plant material to customers, the garden center also offers landscape design and construction services and does approximately 20% of its sales online through eBay or Amazon.	B,E,F,G,H,P,T
B	Garden center B is located near Topeka, Kansas, and was established in the 1950's. It has gone through several ownership changes. The primary revenue source for the garden center is in retail sales of plant material and gardening supplies like fertilizer and weed killer.	E, F
C	Garden center C is located in Wichita, Kansas, and is in its fourth generation of ownership. The primary focus of this garden center is in retail sales split across two locations. In addition to retail plant supplies, the garden center also runs a gift store and a microbrewery store.	B, E, F, I, P, T
D	Garden center D is located in a small town in Western Kansas and is currently in its first generation. The store focuses on retail plant supplies and a year-round gift shop is also a significant component of the business.	F

\* Note. B=blog, E=e-newsletter, F=Facebook, G=Google Plus, H=Houzz, I=Instagram, P=Pinterest, & T=Twitter

Eight interviews were conducted with six participants who were employees or owners and two participants who were garden-center customers. The six employees and owners were used to address RQ1, and the two garden-center customers were used in combination with the six employees and owners to address RQ2. The participants at each garden center included the owner and the employee most responsible for social-media content. After the interviews, participating garden centers were asked to make a Facebook post to recruit volunteers for the study. Participating customers were compensated for their time with a \$25 gift card to the garden center paid for by the research team. Three of the four garden-center employees posted the invitation on the garden-center Facebook page. Two participants from different garden centers responded and participated in the study (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Participant Description	Store
Annie	Annie is an employee at garden center A. She graduated from Kansas State University with a degree in landscape design and took a class in marketing. She is the sole landscape designer for the garden center and is also the marketing manager. She personally uses Facebook and Pinterest for her personal social media.	A
Andy	Andrew is the owner of garden center A. He spent the majority of his career farming. However, when faced with the difficulty of finding a way for the farm to support his children and his retirement, he decided to build a garden center. He does not use social media in his personal life.	A
Brad	Brad is the general manager of garden center B, and he oversees all of the marketing. Brad does not use social media for personal use.	B
Chris	Chris is the fourth-generation manager of this garden center and received a master's degree in business administration. His current role is president of the garden center. He oversees the operations and marketing of the garden center.	C
Carl	Carl is the third-generation manager and is the current CEO. He identified his primary responsibilities are helping with the daily operations, preparing new media content, and taking pictures for marketing purposes. He operates two blogs for the garden center and has a personal blog.	C
Cassie	Cassie is a customer and identifies herself as a marketing and sales representative. She started gardening to relieve the stress associated with her day job. She heard about the garden center through a television advertisement in the 1990's. Her primary interests are in low-water gardening and yucca plants.	C
Diana	Diana is the owner of garden center D and works alongside her husband. Her primary responsibilities are with customer service and education. She is also the sole manager of the Facebook page and is in charge of television and radio advertisements.	D
Donna	Donna is a customer at garden center D. She and her husband own a house in the same town as the garden center and their primary area of interest is in re-establishing their lawn. They were referred to the garden center by friends after a poor experience with a competing garden center.	D

\* Note. pseudonyms beginning with A are from garden center A, ones beginning with B are from garden center B, those beginning with C are from garden center C, and ones beginning with D are from garden center D.

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and an assistant and were entered into NVivo10 (QSR International Pty. Ltd., Doncaster, Victoria, Australia) for coding and analysis. Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method assisted in categorizing responses into relevant major themes. The constant-comparative method allows the researcher to identify

themes that occur in a theoretical fashion and to develop in a natural way from the participants' responses. In this way, the researcher becomes the research instrument by using his or her direct experience with the interviews to identify appropriate commonalities between responses (Flick, 2009).

Credibility, reliability, and transferability are essential components of a qualitative study, and the onus is on the researcher to demonstrate the findings result from data and not subjectivities (Shenton, 2004). All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the research team. All participants were debriefed by a researcher to ensure written data was synonymous with participant perception. Although in-depth interviews can yield rich and meaningful data in exploring the experiences of participants, caution should be used in generalizing the findings beyond the specific units of analysis under specific situations in which they were observed (Flick, 2009). The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board for Kansas State University (project #7183) on 19 May 2014. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Additionally, researchers must include their own subjectivities within the framework of research and acknowledge such subjectivities both internally and to the public in order to understand the influence such assumptions have on the creation, evaluation, and analyzing of research (Creswell, 2007). An ontological lens grounded in a post-positivist paradigm guided the study. The ontological assumption uses the data collected from participants to show different ideas and is concerned with "the nature of reality and its characteristics" (Creswell, 2007, p. 16). The researcher occasionally entered into a methodological assumption of practice in that prior knowledge, a priori assumptions, and continuous change based upon evidence found in the field which guided the research.

## FINDINGS

### **RQ1: How Are Selected Garden-center Employees and Owners Using New Media to Build Relationships With Customers?**

Garden-center owners and employees were asked questions pertaining to the thought process, planning, and scheduling of marketing content. Questions were structured to learn about relationship building prior to asking specifically about building relationships with customers

#### **A Desire for Relationships.**

Participants from every garden center identified some desire to use new media to foster meaningful relationships with customers that would translate into increased profit potential. Brad spoke of how he tries to leverage a personal tone through the e-newsletter. "I think it's more effective when content is not just a bunch of bullet points or descriptions... When it's kind of connected with somebody on a personal level...people connect more with [people] than they do a bunch of features." Carl also expressed a desire to step away from traditional advertising and tell human-interest stories in an attempt to build a relationship and said, "Telling personal stories sets us apart from the competition or at least the big box stores."

In regard to how new media can help develop relationships with her customer base, Annie mentioned, "there's a loyalty that you can build. They feel like we're here and we're available to help." Andy had similar sentiments and said, "You've got to reach the person in a way that they know you truly care about their success."

#### **Don't Sell. Build a Relationship.**

Most garden-center participants agreed trying to directly sell to the consumer through new media was not a beneficial practice and should, in most cases, be avoided. Brad said, "A business trying to sell stuff [on Facebook] is in the way. That's not what their account is for...I don't know that I'm going to see [Facebook] being used a lot more [for business]. Diana mentioned personal posts "do better than when I try to sell something...every time I try to sell something I get slapped down. Stay away from direct selling...Encourage people to come in."

Carl also viewed his marketing efforts as a relationship management tool and said, "[my goal is] trying to build a con-

nection and build a relationship...You can [build a relationship] one-on-one with a person or through social media." Chris said, "if [my post] is something I would consider an advertisement, I wouldn't expect much engagement with customers."

### **E-newsletters Are the Medium for Relationships.**

Participants at three of the four garden centers preferred e-newsletters for building relationships with customers. The one garden-center employee that did not mention an e-newsletter did not have one. Chris and Carl mentioned relationships are more effectively built through the e-newsletter than through social-media platforms like Facebook. Carl mentioned that if he were to recommend a platform to market to the consumer, he would focus on e-newsletters that tell a story. "You need to be doing an e-news and just tell stories." This platform offered a way for garden centers to show the personal side of the business and share stories of what was happened at the garden center.

### **Market To the Consumer Through Educational and Valuable Content.**

All stakeholders identified the value of content is the most important aspect of any post and all content should provide value to the customer. Andy mentioned the necessity of valuable content and said, "There's no substitute for [good content]...People won't give you their email if they think you're just going to send advertising to them." Annie alluded to the concept that good content has the end result of educating the consumer. "Ultimate success," she says, "would be for customers to be informed about what we have and what to do."

Participants hoped educating customers would produce a profitable relationship. Brad said, "We don't [educate the consumer] for the sake of education. The only reason we're [educating them] is to make money. Not trying to sound greedy, but we're not Extension." Chris mentioned he tries to, "provide information to customers. If we've got an unexpected frost coming...or bag worms are starting to hatch...trying to relay that information to people." Diana posts "things you should be doing with gardening."

### **E-newsletter Involves Strategic Planning.**

All participants who used an e-newsletter believed it was an integral part of their marketing strategy. Brad stated, "We talk about [the newsletter] as a group and try to come up with an outline...[that] will do something for business." Chris spoke of a consistent release strategy and stated, "E-news goes out on Wednesday. [We're] trying to stay fresh in the customer's mind about the upcoming weekend. I think if we go earlier than that, they get forgotten about by the weekend." Annie mentioned she uses more strategy in regard to her e-newsletter than on her Facebook posts, saying, "I do have a lot more strategy that goes into my newsletters than into my Facebook posts."

### **Social-media Posting is Reactionary.**

All stakeholders identified a lack of strategy for social media and viewed it as reactionary in nature with little-to-no strategic planning needed. Brad mentioned, "Social media...needs to be spontaneous." Although Annie identified she spent considerable time evaluating the analytics of her e-newsletter she mentioned, "There isn't a process [for social media]. Most of the [postings] aren't strategized." Chris said, "We really don't have a well-defined strategy," and Andy said, "there's no strategic planning." Diana mentioned, "there is no strategy." When asked about an editorial calendar she replied, "What's that?"

### **Garden Centers Are Not Learning From Customers Online.**

All participants identified communication with customers and fostering a relationship through Facebook or the e-newsletter as vital to differentiating their business from large retailers. However, participants could not identify specific examples regarding what they learned about their customers. Annie said, "I've really never sat down and thought about what I learn about my customers online." Brad, Chris, and Andy had similar responses. When asked what he has learned about his customers from new media, Brad replied "nothing."

## **RQ2: How Are Garden-center Customers Engaging With New-media Content?**

In order to assess this research question, garden-center employees and owners were asked about customer interaction via new media. Additionally, two garden-center customers were asked about their experiences with the garden centers using new media.

### **Customers Share Positive Garden-center Experiences With Their Friends.**

Both customers mentioned a history of praising the garden center for great customer service by creating a post on the “wall” of the garden-center’s Facebook page. Donna said, “I shared a post before when I first liked them...When we were in the middle of doing our lawn and they had been very helpful.” Cassie recalled one particularly hot day visiting the garden center and said, “I got exceptional customer service one day...I wrote on [the Facebook page] an atta-boy.”

Participants at half of the garden centers mentioned customers often post on the Facebook page when they have either a positive or negative experience. Diana alluded to how customers will leave positive feedback when they are either happy with the quality of a purchased product or with the level of customer support they received. She said, “people will comment about the great service. So, I’m getting feedback from the customer on what my level of service is.” Annie also identified customers will post praise when products perform well, saying, “I remember one of our customers posted pictures of her limelight hydrangeas that were doing super amazing and looked awesome.”

### **Customers Are Selective With Engagement.**

Both customers identified specific intentions regarding how they engage with posts. Donna stated, “The only reason I shared [the post] to someone’s page was they were doing what we were doing. [I said] Check this out, it may help you, too...I believe they bought it.” Cassie mentioned she would share a post, “if it’s something that is a pretty good deal I’ll share that.” She also said, “if the page had something on there about drought resistant flowers, I’d share that with people because it’s just good information to have.”

Both customers also identified several reasons for commenting on posts. Donna said, “my husband commented [on a post]. They were doing a give-away or something like that. He commented on it and said I should do it.” Cassie mentioned commenting on Facebook posts helps her feel like she is part of the community and only does so “when I have something worthy to say.”

Employees and garden center owners identified specific content that customers usually engage with. Annie mentioned, “a lot of times with the pictures, when they’re really pretty pictures or interesting, they’ll like it.” Brad echoed this statement and said, “if we post a picture, someone will post a comment like what is that, can it be grown here, or do we have it in stock?” Chris mentioned when he posts a picture of plant material or products on the Facebook page people will comment with statements like, “oh I need that. Or, they will tag their friends and say check this out.” In regards to the specific types of content that generate the most engagement, Chris mentioned, “if it’s unique or novel they’re more likely to comment.”

### **Customers Desire Meaningful, Educational Content.**

Participants at all the garden centers and both customers mentioned a desire for educational content. Andy mentioned a perceived strength of the garden-center’s new media is that he “can help you be successful because we know this plant will work.” Annie also mentioned a positive viewpoint of the educational content posted on new media and said, “I think people enjoy the educational part of it.” Brad views new media, mainly the e-newsletter, as a way to disseminate educational content and views it as, “a great opportunity for us to educate people online.”

Customers also identified a desire for meaningful content that was educational or relational in nature. Speaking of the e-newsletter, Cassie stated, “[Carl] gives value and reason for things that he’s doing. Rather than just here’s the new

plants...come in and buy them. He tells you where to grow them, how to grow them, and what they're good for." Although Donna describes her use of Facebook as, "mostly like the Yellow Pages," she did mention she values educational content and would, "Spend more time looking at it."

### **Selling is Acceptable.**

While all of the employees and owners were hesitant to directly post advertisements or sale information on their Facebook page, the two customers desired some level of advertising. Customers spoke about following the garden centers on Facebook for the purpose of finding out about sales. There was a feeling that they should know about sales before people who weren't following them on Facebook. Cassie spoke of advertising on Facebook and said, "it's perfectly ok for [garden centers] to advertise the time is running out on our half price daisy sales and leave it at that. There's a difference between delivering information and having a 4x6 [mailer]." Donna also mentioned the desire to see some form of advertising and said, "a little would be good. A lot of it I might skip over, but it would be nice to see it...just don't blow up my news feed."

### **Helpful Sales Staff Produce Customer Loyalty.**

Speaking of her experience at the garden center, Cassie stated, "I haven't talked to one person who couldn't answer all of my questions. When you go to Walmart, they can't even spell flower...Social media got me in the door, but the people [and their service] kept me there." She added, "if you're going to pay more to support a local merchant...Having that person explain how to care for it, what to look for, is huge." Donna also identified that the knowledgeable staff was the reason she only visits Diana's garden center, saying "[We visit] because of Diana. Every time we've gone in there she's been able to answer our questions or send us in the right direction."

### **Customers Are Seeking and Searching for Information.**

Although customers want to visit the garden center for specific questions, the two customer participants indicated they use online tools such as Pinterest, Google, and email. Describing how she would find information related to gardening, Cassie stated, "I'll email Carl." And even though Donna mentioned she believes she gets better help when she visits the garden center to ask questions, she prefers the Internet. She described how she is trying to find information about how to grow herbs for the spring, "I start with Pinterest. It used to be Google, and now it's just Pinterest. Pinterest is organized in a way that makes sense in my head. It's obviously, not everything is true. It sends you to a lot of good blogs."

## **CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The results of this study indicated selected garden-center operators have a desire to build relationships with consumers, which is a recommendation of relationship management theory. The goal is so ingrained in the employees' and owners' minds that they believe they should not sell at all on social or new-media outlets, which is one area where the customers differed from the employees and owners. The owners and employees thought it was unacceptable to sell to their customers through new media. However, the customers wanted to know about sales on certain products or other forms of advertising. They did note that too much would be negative, but they felt they followed the garden center for the purpose of finding out what was going on and sales were a part of that. This indicates that while garden-center owners and employees were seeking to build relationships, they may not be providing the customers with all of their needs, which is necessary for a symbiotic relationship to work (Paine, 2011).

While the garden centers sought to build relationships with all new media, the e-newsletter was the most mentioned related to building relationships through sharing the story of the garden center. This aligns with the recommendations of Heinonen and Strandvik (2003), who indicate e-newsletters can be a straightforward way to build customer relationships. Additionally, the e-newsletter was something that garden centers felt was an important part of the marketing strategy of the businesses. The owners and employees took time out of meetings to plan the content and focus on creating quality content that was useful to customers. There was a clear process for approaching the use of e-newsletters. Adversely, social media was seen as reactionary. Employees and owners felt that this content needed to be spontaneous and

should not be planned in advance. There was no process for how social-media content was developed and posted. This lack of planning and strategy is a concern and could hinder the building of a strong relationship between garden-center operators and customers.

One way the garden-center businesses sought to build relationships with customers was through sharing educational content through new media that was of value. The garden-center operators hoped this relationship, built on valuable content, would eventually generate sales. This aligns with previous research by Niemiera et al. (1993) that noted a barrier to customers purchasing plants was a lack of knowledge or previously unfruitful experiences with plants. Additionally, this relationship was something garden-center operators recognized as valuable and built on trust. They understood what it meant when someone provided their email. This aligns with Baggot (2011) who said e-newsletters indicate a social contract between two parties.

While garden-center owners and employees sought to build a relationship with customers through new media, they were not viewing this relationship as a two-way function. It is an important part of relationship management theory to not only view public relations as relationship management (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), but also a shared concern with a two-way symbiotic function (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Paine, 2011). Moreover, garden-center employees and owners were not learning from their customers. They were not using analytics to determine the best times to post or the topics that were of most interest to customers. They were not using new media to gain the full potential of online engagement with their customers. Paine (2011) reports that measurement tools must be used to obtain an advanced level of engagement.

Customers were engaging with content from the garden-centers' new media through sharing positive experiences with their friends both online and offline. However, customers were selective with engagement. The content had to be valuable and something that they thought would help them and their friends. If customers felt they had something worthy to say, they were willing to comment or post. This feeling from customers aligned with what garden-center employees and owners thought about the need to deliver valuable content and quality education that customers were not seeing from larger box stores. Customers appreciated content that was unique, educational, and established a relationship with the owners and/or store employees. This indicates these relationships are built on trust and satisfaction, as recommended by Paine (2011).

The helpfulness of sales staff was of major importance to the customers and something the garden-center employees and owners recognized as one of their strengths. Customers and employees realized the value they provide in this area is paramount and this can take place in a new-media format in addition to in person. This could be one component of providing customer delight, as recommended by Behe and Barton (2000).

Customers were continually seeking information online on multiple platforms related to planting and gardening. While the personal connection of the garden centers were important, other sources were also consulted and played a role in making purchasing decisions.

### **Recommendations for Practitioners**

Several recommendations are offered to garden-center employees and owners based on these findings. Since customers are looking at garden centers online for their purchases, garden-center stakeholders should consider using principles of relationship management theory and offer customers an exchange relationship in order to move them along the engagement continuum. The exchange relationship is a key aspect of relationship marketing and this allows the garden-center operators to learn from their customers. By listening to and learning from the customer, employees and owners will be able to better understand customer desires and needs. Understanding customer desires will allow garden-center employees and owners to improve the quality of educational content being shared via new media. The more valuable a business' content is on social media, the more helpful and beneficial its online presence may be.

### **Recommendations for New-Media Marketers**

It is recommended that new-media marketers strategically plan posts or campaigns, in advance, the same way they do other forms of successful traditional advertising like radio, newspaper, television, and other new media like e-newsletters. This study also recommends measurement be considered a vital and integrated part of strategy, especially in regard to relationship management. Measurement should be conducted in order to move the customer to the loyalty phase of customer engagement and to an advocacy level of relationships. This study recommends a measured, methodical use of new media that is focused on collecting relevant data in order to actively build meaningful relationships. It is recommended communicators not view a sale as the ultimate determinant of success of new-media marketing but the presence of loyal, brand advocate relationships.

Limited resources may exist for the proper implementation of new-media marketing and any such position may be split among other responsibilities within the organization. Therefore, this study suggests organizations allocate time during leadership meetings to address all new-media marketing strategies and how to integrate it into the daily operations of the business or organization. It is also recommended that, through shared leadership meetings, daily or weekly tasks related to new-media marketing be assigned to relevant stakeholders to make sure social media is not an afterthought but instead what Mangold and Faulds (2009) identify as a hybrid-marketing element.

### **Recommendations for Teachers**

Faculty should focus on fostering an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of new-media marketing for agricultural businesses or organizations. In doing so, faculty will ensure students transitioning into the industry will have sufficient knowledge to create new-media campaigns with the building and managing of relationships in mind. More emphasis should be placed on the necessity of accurate and in-depth measurement approaches for social media that extend beyond the basic metrics of likes, comments, clicks, and shares in an effort to establish a relationship with consumers (Paine, 2011). Students must be well versed in analyzing trends and correlations that give insight into behavior and preferences. Students must be equipped with knowledge and understanding that measurement is not an afterthought of new-media marketing but an integrated, essential, and all-encompassing strategy that guides all objectives, strategies, and tactics, and is never finished.

Future research should focus on consumers' perceptions and preferences in regard to new media. Since educational and relevant content is paramount to consumers, this study recommends research be conducted to identify what content garden-center customers desire. This study also recommends research be conducted that identifies what aspects of relationship marketing resonate with the consumer. Additionally, future research should be conducted on how the level of consumer relationships affects buying behavior. In addition to measuring the relationship of consumers who follow local businesses on social media, future research should also identify which new-media platforms yield the greatest return on investment for increased sales, increased reputation, and increased relationships.

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