

Green Growth: An Exploratory Study of Metro and Non-metro Garden Centers' Use of New Media Marketing

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Introduction

Mass merchants and big-box stores could negatively impact the economic viability of garden centers. In order to compete against such retail giants, small, family-owned garden centers focus on offering exceptional customer service and developing meaningful relationships. New media marketing campaigns are relatively low cost and if used correctly could positively impact garden centers. New media excels at fostering consumer engagement, interaction, and developing relationships. Garden centers that are not using social media as part of their marketing strategy could be putting their business at a disadvantage.

Sampling Procedures

- A list of 23 metro and non-metro Kansas garden centers was compiled by a State Extension specialist with expert knowledge of the field
- The previous 60 days of posts of each garden center was evaluated using Smitha's (2013) engagement formula: $Engagement\ Rate = (Likes + Comments + Shares) / Total\ Fans$
- Garden centers were then ranked from highest engaging to lowest engaging.
- One high engaging and low-engaging garden center was chosen from the metro and non-metro list
- They were contacted for participation in the fall
- After the interviews were conducted, the garden centers created a post asking for customers to participate in an interview in exchange for a \$25 gift card to the store

Methodology

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight participants were conducted between November 2014 and January 2015.
- Participants were immediately debriefed following the interview.
- Recordings were transcribed by the researcher and a research assistant.
- Responses were analyzed and themes generated via Glaser's (1968) Constant Comparative method.
- NVivo10 was used to facilitate the categorization of themes and categories.

Participants

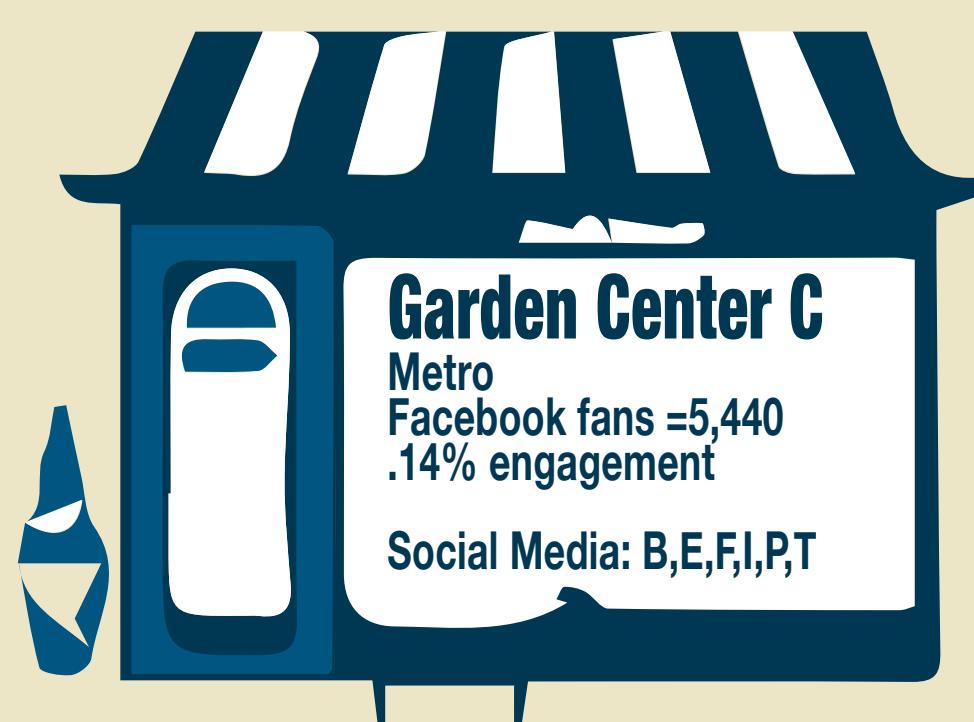
Key: B = blog, E = e-newsletter, F=Facebook, G=Google +, H = Houzz, P = Pinterest, T = Twitter



Annie
Employee
Graduated from KSU with a degree in landscape design
Sole landscape designer
Marketing manager.
Uses Facebook and Pinterest for her personal social media.



Brad
General manager
Oversees all marketing
Does not use social media



Carl
Third-generation manager and CEO
Helps with daily operations and preparing new-media content
Primary photographer of garden center
Operates two blogs for the garden center

Chris
Fourth-generation manager
MBA
Current president
Oversees all operations and marketing of the garden center



Diana
Owner
Responsible for customer service and education
Manages Facebook page
Creates television and radio advertisements

Donna
Customer at garden center D
She and her husband own a house.
Primary interest is re-establishing lawn
Referred to store D by a friend

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Findings

RQ1: What are stakeholder perceptions and attitudes toward new media marketing?

1. Stakeholders prefer familiar and traditional marketing strategies
2. Stakeholders strategically plan traditional media
3. Stakeholders see some positives for social media but are skeptical of the ROI.

- Benefits to social media
"Social media is extremely important for rural garden centers. I feel it should be more important to them than people in the middle of the city because...the population isn't here to support how we want to live." Andy

- Skeptical of ROI
"To be able to tell you it has made me a single dime, I can't. I don't have any way to track it. I'm spending time on [Facebook] and I cannot justify the amount of time being spent on it for the sales that are generated." Diana

RQ3: What new media strategies are being implemented in the marketing of metro and non-metro garden centers?

1. New-media marketing focuses on building relationships and providing educational content

"[Telling personal stories] sets us apart from the competition, or at least the big-box stores... and tell the customer we are still involved in the day-to-day operations of the business and we've been around a long time. People like hearing those human interest stories." Carl

"Content has to be above reproach...That's just king...it can't have anything to do with selling...It has to be about good, sound information on how to grow plants, how to take care of plants, how to prevent disease, and how to treat disease...People won't give you their email address if they think you're just going to send advertising to them." Andy

2. Strategic planning is limited to the e-newsletter

"I do have a lot more strategy that goes into my newsletters than into my Facebook posts." Annie

"There is no strategy for social media." Diana

RQ2: What barriers do employees and owners encounter when using new media to market their business?

1. Stakeholders lack time and training

• Too busy with other responsibilities
"I'm in charge of all the marketing and the advertisements. We all have other jobs, so marketing is more my job than anybody else's, but it's not my only job nor is it my most important job." Annie

• Considerable time is spent educating customers
"Educating customers is what I do all day long. It's my biggest role. It's full time. I do more of that than anything else." Andy

2. Stakeholders desire high-touch channels of education from experienced professionals

"I guess there's that sense of trust...it's people that are fighting the same fight we are. That we're able to learn from what they're doing. I don't hold a lot of credence for those that call themselves a social media expert just because it's, you can't quantify it. The people that have actually been there and done that I think to me have more credibility." Chris

RQ4: What are stakeholder perceptions regarding customer interaction of new media marketing content?

1. Customers interact with garden centers by sharing their experiences and engaging with content

"I got exceptional customer service one day. It was just freaking brutal hot picking out something. The kids were so patient with me. I wrote [on the Facebook page] an 'atta-boy.' " Cassie

2. Customers desire meaningful, relevant, and educational content

"[I'd like] more information on the resources available...something simple like how to plant seeds for those of us who have no clue. I'd like to watch videos, especially if they advertised on Facebook and sent me to YouTube." Donna

3. Customers gather information from a variety of sources and reward expertise with loyalty

"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 easier to find blogs and stuff like that. I like the official K-State gardening manual, but the rest of the website I wasn't impressed with." Donna

Recommendations

For Practitioners

Garden centers should

- Develop relationships with online customers built from active listening and measurement.
- Focus on developing brand advocates as outlined by the five-tier model of relationship management in figure one.
- Focus on developing meaningful and relevant content.

Social-media marketers should

- Strategically plan posts or campaigns and view strategic planning and measurement as a cyclical process.
- Properly educate relevant stakeholders regarding the strengths and weaknesses of social-media marketing and the necessary resources required.

For Future Research

- Identify what new-media content garden center consumers desire.
- Identify what aspects of relationship marketing are resonating with the customers.
- Determine how the level of relationship affects buying behavior.
- Empirically test the five-tiered relationship management conceptual model to determine if this is an effective method to approaching relationship marketing.
- Identify preferred learning channels and methods of garden center consumers.

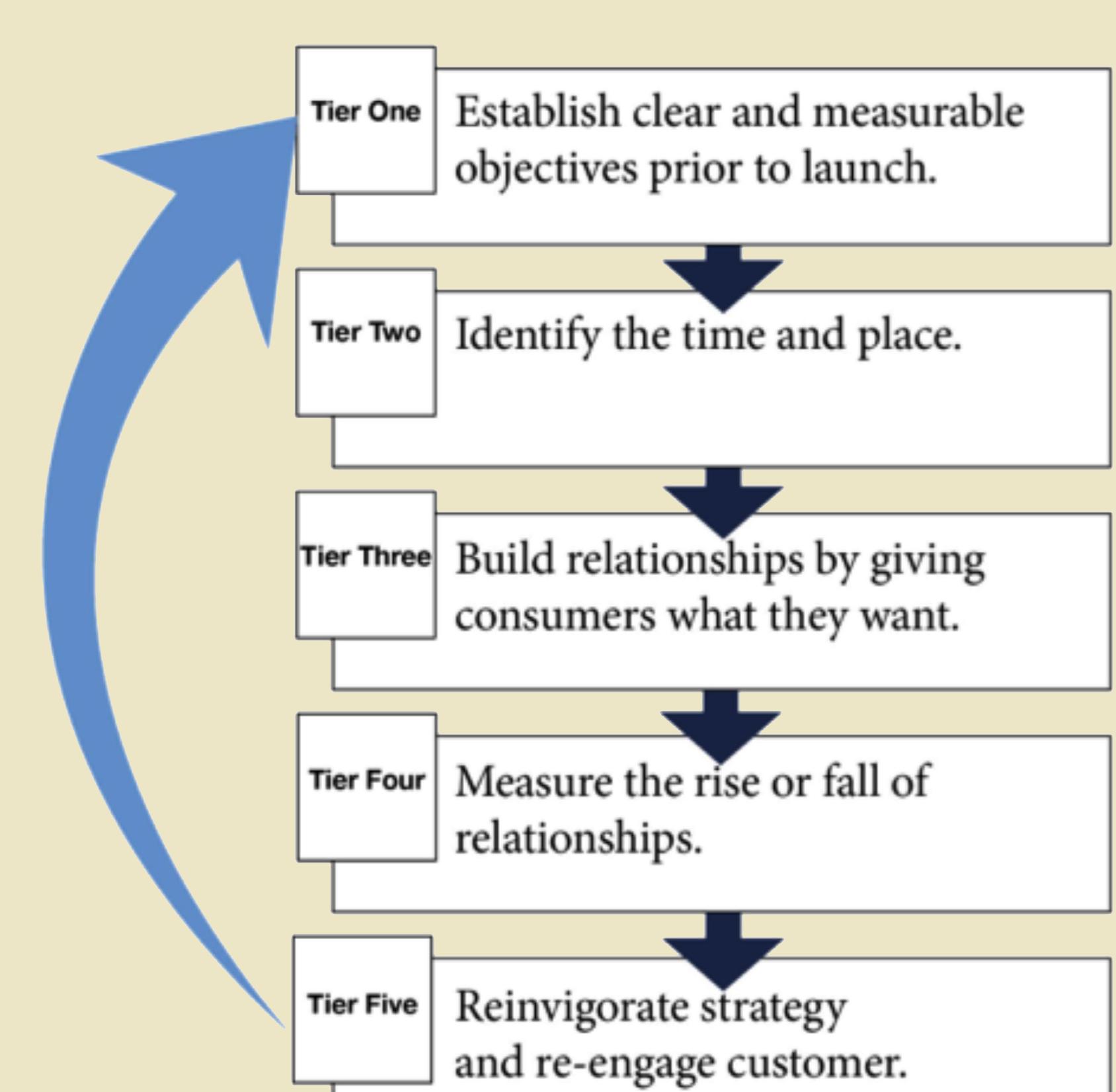


Figure One: Five-Tiered Model of Relationship Marketing