

The social network

Dr Nicola Davies talks to experts in the industry on engaging social media and building a loyal following

Building loyalty among customers is a key driver for success in any business enterprise, and this is certainly the case for garden centres. But what is the role of social media in nurturing this ongoing commitment? We spoke to leading experts in the field to gain their advice.

Driving loyalty
Social media and user behaviour management specialist Antonio Calero has some advice on driving loyalty through social media.

He emphasises the utility of social media as a marketing tool but recognises that it is not a one-way conversation. He said: "Let's not forget that communicating to your audience is one of the pillars of successful marketing. "As such, using social media as a broadcasting tool is not a bad thing – the problem resides in using it

only as a broadcasting tool for self-promotion. Successful companies always consider the 'social' part of social media and use it to listen to their followers and engage in conversation."

This view is supported by Edwin Meijer, marketing director of Garden Connect. His company strongly benefits from its online solutions.

He said: "Facebook is the best and most popular social media site. Teenagers are leaving this platform but all groups above 25 years of age show an increase in the number of people

Be yourself
It's important for your customers to know who you are as a human being – someone they can relate to.

using Facebook, and they happen to be the ones visiting garden centres more frequently than teenagers. Pinterest is also a great channel as most of the users are female, 30 plus, and looking for inspiration." Calero and Meijer gave us three key tips on how garden centres can best pursue a social media strategy:

Know the competition
The first step is becoming a follower of your competitors

Follow competitors
"The first step is becoming a follower of your competitors," Calero advised. "Ensure you receive all of their news and updates – make sure Facebook isn't filtering any content from you. There are many tools to help

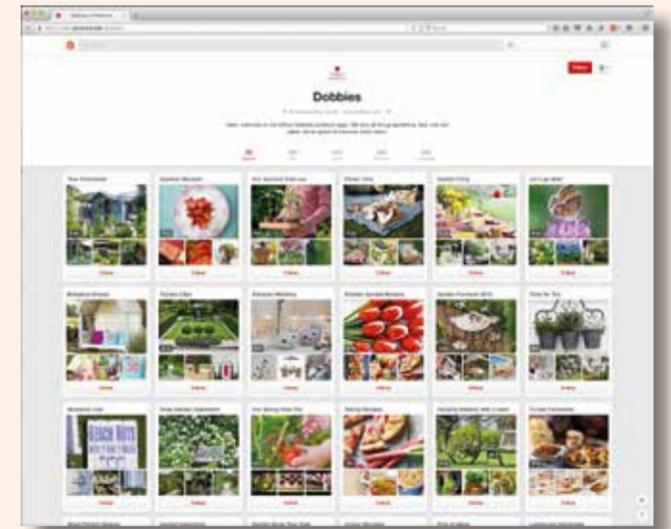
Dobbies pinpoints Pinterest presence

Sitemorse is a company which provides web content management systems and conducts quarterly testing of content provided by garden centres. In March, Dobbies took first place of the 11 garden centres evaluated.

Dobbies' Pinterest presence is particularly interesting, featuring 39 boards with topics varying from outdoor furniture to colour block plantings. Its Facebook page features

specials and promotions, with lots of delicious pictures of food served on the premises. It is the food which prompts the most comments.

Overall, Dobbies' Facebook page is attractive but judging by the number of comments isn't too interactive. Its Twitter page has a massive 12,500 followers and double the number of tweets as Cleeve Nursery. Cleeve has only a 10th of the followers of Dobbies, but with 2,217 tweets versus 4,522 from Dobbies, Cleeve Nursery has engaged followers more effectively. www.dobbies.com



Conversation pieces
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Planning
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allowing you to acquire more participants, who might come back after the event. "One top tip: ask questions in your post and use photos. You could post a photo of a beautiful garden and ask your followers what they think of it. This will always work to get more interaction."

Increase interaction
Setting up a content calendar of events enables posts to be prepared in time. Meijer suggested: "Social media can generate response to events,

Offering a free item to the first 1,000 followers on a particular social media site will also gain a huge amount of exposure and has been proven to drive a significant increase in sales.

Finally, make sure the icons for your various social media outlets are on your website and emails so that potential customers can seamlessly move across to access your various posts. ▶

with these activities, with the main metric to focus on not being reach (as many think), but rather engagement.

Tools such as AgoraPulse allow benchmarking your own engagement on Facebook with that of competitors, so when you see another company is suddenly receiving increased attention, it is easier to monitor their page to see what they are doing."

Keep content fresh
It's important for your customers to know who you are as a human being – someone they can relate

to. You might be a nursery owner who is passionate about cycling. If so, let your customers know how your preparation is going for various races and post photos of the events afterwards. It is very important in all cases to keep the flow of content fresh and interesting.

Also, responding to what followers have to say, whether it is positive or negative, will itself drive loyalty. If there is a valid complaint, make changes and invite customers to see the improvement.

Cleeve Nursery has got it just right

Cleeve Nursery in Bristol ticks all the boxes, Meijer has suggested. Its presence on Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube is filled with interesting content – who wouldn't want to know about the bee-friendly planted pick-up truck?

Its YouTube channel has lots of 'how to' videos, with a professionally written blog by Alan Down, a master of horticulture. The sites are filled with appropriate pictures

However, its Pinterest only has two boards – 'indoor plants' and 'great plant combinations'. Here the nursery could start a group board that allows interested viewers to add pins. By looking at what people are adding, you can detect trends.

The nursery's Facebook posts include plenty of tips for gardeners, which is great for encouraging hesitant buyers. There are invitations for customers to bring their kids to the nursery for specific

events such as to see the banana plant in bloom, and posts on bee-friendly plants which connect with the issue of the threat to bees. The posts are tempting buyers with top tips, opening offerings to families and connecting with newsworthy issues – ensuring posts reach a range of people with different interests.

If you are interested in seeing how one nursery has got it just right, visit www.cleevenursery.co.uk.



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