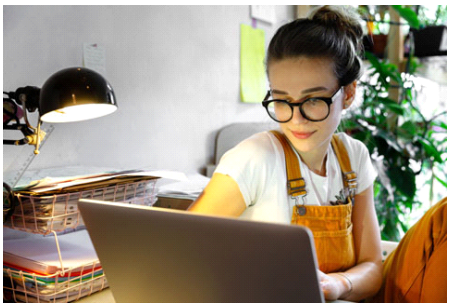
GROWERTALKS

Features

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Service in Real Time

Katie Elzer-Peters



When an aspect of customer service becomes common across many industries, consumer expectation is that businesses in every industry will offer the service. While you don't have to jump on every bandwagon, getting on board can help you grow your business—especially if the service allows your customers to spend more money easily with you.

In the green industry, that means offering live online inventory or the ability to shop online. If it sounds like e-commerce, it is—only your customers are mostly going to be placing draft orders that you'll have to confirm.

Why the fuss if you still have to confirm the orders? Because shopping online is how people buy almost everything, especially in this post-COVID world. It's a lot easier for people to merrily click through a website full of nice photos and hit "submit" than it is to download a spreadsheet, read the tiny print, cross-reference other websites or catalogs, save correctly, and email back. (Just typing that makes me tired.)

Here's how to get started with live inventory to boost your business.

Pick a project manager

Designate a project manager before you do anything else. They don't have to be senior management or a tech specialist, but they do have to be organized, good at communication and interested in the undertaking. It helps if they embrace the ideology, "Never give up!" because moving to live inventory is a big lift and they'll be the project's cheerleader until it's done. You might find that you have the perfect internal fit to manage it and you'll need to hire someone new to perform their current role.

Document & plan

Review and document current steps required for customers to place orders. Who sends availability to customers? How? In what format? How do they send their orders back? Who confirms the orders? How are they picked? Scheduled for delivery or pickup? Do you work more off of pre-orders or spec growing? If you want to replicate or change those processes, first you have to know what those processes are.

Next, define what "success" looks like. Decide which changes, improvements and enhancements you'd like to make to your ordering process. How do you want to improve the customer experience? How do you want to grow your business? Are there efficiencies you want to gain? If you work on pre-orders, but want to do more spec, jot that down. In order to end up with a system that works well for you, you need to know what "working well" means for your

business. Make a list of “non-negotiables” and “nice, but not necessary.”

This type of prep will ensure that you build a system that does what you need, ideally within your budget, and can prevent you from succumbing to “shiny object syndrome.” Of course you’ll learn about capabilities you might not have imagined once you start evaluating software and you can make room in your plans. Remember, though—every additional service you offer is something you’ll have to manage.

Investigate software options

There are dozens of options available, from industry-specific to more generic solutions that can be configured for the green industry. I recommend starting with what works with software you already use a lot. Maybe you have a CRM with decades worth of data that still works well and there’s a live online inventory solution that integrates easily. Maybe you have a huge WordPress website with lots of photos and info, but you hadn’t thought of adding WooCommerce.

If it’s been more than five years since you last made a big software change or purchase, it’s worth looking at the whole picture, though. You might end up re-arranging more than your website to set yourself up for growth.

These are the types of software that will need to interact or connect well for optimum growth. It doesn’t have to happen “automagically.” Maybe the best solution is downloading availability weekly from your ERP and uploading to your website because your website integrates with your email provider and your SMS provider for back-in-stock alerts. There are unlimited configurations! Pay special attention to the way these types of software will interact: email marketing, website, inventory management systems, SMS system, CRM and delivery scheduling.

Pro tip: Every business is different and therefore every configuration of tech is different. You can ask your colleagues what they use, but just because it works for them doesn’t mean it will work for you! The converse is also true. Something might not be a good fit for them, but will be great for your business.

Remember that salespeople have a vested interest in you using their solution. It’s also a trend for software companies to offer “all-in-one” solutions that combine the website, inventory system, email marketing and CRM in one package. That can be convenient, but it can also mean that you get a product that’s marginally great at handling several needs and not great at any of them.

When you find an online live inventory solution that you like, identify what about your current systems and processes you’ll have to change. There are available tools to connect different software options and you can still have manual steps. All-in-one isn’t always best. Don’t torpedo your successful email program because your ERP doesn’t integrate.

Prepare data

Live inventory requires, at a minimum:

- Product names
- Product sizes/variations
- Pricing

You’ll be vastly more successful if you also include:

- Photos
- Descriptions
- Care info

It’s a heavy lift to get all of this together, but you’ll be so glad you did. Stephanie Carstensen of Bizon Nursery said, “Anything you can do to front load and do once, touch once, you’ll appreciate time and time again that you don’t have to do it again.”

Bizon uses PlantX. Stephanie recommends that you stay on top of photos and info for new additions to the website. “You can use those photos over and over in email marketing and social media, among other things,” she said.

Most live online inventory solutions allow you to upload lots of data via spreadsheets. Figure out which fields you’ll need and fill in the spreadsheet as you go. Google Sheets is a good tool for this because it’s live, so many can contribute and it’s backed up in the cloud. (Periodically download a copy, though, just in case!)

Implement & train

When it’s time to configure your new system, create user profiles and limit access to the tools people need to do their jobs. Provide training for staff and customers. Loom is a great tool for making screencast videos so you can demonstrate how your website works. Staff need to know how the site works for order processing, inventory management and product additions, as well as how the customer-facing side works in case they need to answer questions.

Create some customer resources, as well, and make them easy to find. Quality Greenhouses has a tab called “How to Order” that links customers to step-by-step instructions. Remember: make it easy to shop!

Tell your customers all about it!

Make a fuss over your new availability! Communicate the benefits—easy ordering, saving a shopping cart, re-ordering, great photos and, most importantly, current availability. If you’re not already doing email marketing, announcing a nifty new tool is a great time to start. Use those photos you had to take and provide some inspirational copy and info. Remember, your customers might be buying wholesale, but they’re still people who like to be inspired.

Once you’re up and running, keep notes about changes and improvements. The best part about live online inventory is that it’s online. You can always update it! **GT**

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