GROWERTALKS

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Under the Influence

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With the rise of social media has come the rise of a category of marketers called “influencers.” These are celebrities, experts (or wannabe experts), thought-leaders and content creators who, through smarts, creativity or wackiness (often a combination of all three) have generated a following of consumers through their online postings on social media sites like YouTube, Instagram and Twitter.

I’ll admit to falling under the influence of some influencers. I spend an inordinate amount of time on YouTube watching videos by “Alex French Guy Cooking,” “Colin Furze,” “Clickspring,” “Wintergatan,” “Alec Steele,” “Tim Pierce Guitar” and “That Pedal Show.” All have subscriber numbers in six or even seven digits; they can post a video and within hours have a quarter million views. All are fabulous storytellers. Some are genius videographers and editors, too.

Yet you’ve never heard of any of them, have you? Not even Colin Furze? How is that possible? He’s got 7.2 million subscribers. His “Staircase Treadmill” video got 5.5 million views in its first week.

Certainly, you’ve heard of PewDiePie, right? With 85 million subscribers and 20.4 billion total views, he’s the most-watched YouTube star of all.

In our world of flowers, plants and gardening, the numbers are more humble, but still significant. “Garden Answer,” with host Laura LeBoutillier, has 460,000 YouTube subscribers and 60.6 million views—some of the largest numbers I found for a gardening influencer. The dry delivery style of hydroponic experimenter “Jeb Gardener” has attracted 209,000 subscribers. His video “Gardener Ignores the Laws of Nature!” has 8.6 million views.

The majority of the most-watched gardening channels, including those from garden-crazy England, tend to be about organic and sustainable food gardening. Houseplants, the current darling of social media? I found a few specialists on YouTube, but none with impressive numbers—10,000 or 15,000 subscribers tops.

Instagram is the social media site getting all the mentions in the press, what with urban hipsters flaunting their “jungalos” and monstera specimens. #houseplantclub is the name I hear most often. Created by Morgan Doan and Erin Harding, they have 494,000 followers—that’s a lot of folks who want to look at photos of Pilea peperomioides.

Here’s my question: What impact has any of this had on your sales? Do the posts of influencers move the needle at

retail garden centers in Scranton or Saskatchewan? Or do they only make for good headlines? (“Instead of houses, young people have houseplants” wrote The Economist in August 2018.)

The answer, according to Proven Winners’ Marshall Dirks, is, “There’s no doubt.” I tend to believe him. Marshall is one of the savviest marketers in the business and he’s worked with the aforementioned Ms. LeBoutillier for several years.

Says Marshall, “We get comments all the time on our social media about folks saying they’re running out to the garden center to get what Laura just talked about.” Marshall adds that the organizers of the Charlotte (NC) Spring Home & Garden Show, where Laura is speaking this winter, doubled the size of a meet-and-greet space in anticipation of the crowds coming to see her. And remember, Laura does her gardening and vlogging clear across the country in Oregon!

All that said, there’s no reason for you to depend on the social media star to sell your products. YOU can be the influencer among your customers. YOU know the products. YOU can directly reach them via email or your social media accounts. YOU know what’s in stock and ready to sell. I mean, what good is it if Morgan and Erin post photos of monstera every Monday (yes, Monstera Monday is a thing) and you don’t have any to sell? (Note: You should.)

Certainly, take advantage of what influencers are doing. Post Instagram and Pinterest photos in your garden center. Link to Garden Answer videos from your website. You growers can share cool new ideas in your weekly availability emails. That lets your customers know that you’re on top of the trends—and that’s important, as the best businesses lead, they don’t follow.

Social media is daunting and you can’t keep up with everything. Nor should you. But pick a category or two in which you can gain some expertise, and then find a way to tap into it, be it videos or regular Instagram posts. Or assign the task to an employee who’s up on that sort of thing to be your social media specialist. Let him or her become your in-house influencer or CIO—Chief Influence Officer.

If they’re good, maybe I’ll add them to my list of must-see YouTubers.

I might even buy your t-shirt to hang next to my Alec Steele “Forged in Steele” t-shirt. **GT**