GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

5/1/2020

# Communications Strategies & Tips During Challenging Times

*Kerstin Poehlmann*

Communication, always key for successful businesses, now is as essential as agriculture itself. Keeping the lines open, so that customers and potential customers know you're there for them, is vital. The uncertainty of the current situation creates anxiety in people, so knowing that some things are constant is important. Let your customers know you're there for them—and that you are their constant. A few tips as you're crafting your message and strategy:

Individualize. Don't copy and paste what you see others communicate. Construct your own statement, including elements that you know are important to your customers.

**Reassure, then move on.** Make the point that you're taking all precautionary measures, then focus on what you're doing to guarantee the continuity of the business and your support to them. If you're a grower, have your hours or availability changed? Will you still be offering delivery? Is pickup an option? If you're a garden center, what options do people have? Online orders? Phone orders? Shopping appointments? Delivery? Curbside pickup?

**Communicate creatively.** This isn't the time to continue with the status quo; this is the time to try out that new strategy you've been considering. If you're a garden center, seize this opportunity to promote vegetable gardening and educate your customers on how to do it. Again, be THERE for them. How about a Facebook Live event demonstrating how to set up a vegetable garden? Growers, do you have a regular customer e-newsletter? Now is the time to get one started. Facebook Live can work for you, too, with live culture tips or virtual greenhouse visits showing what's coming next, whether in availability or new varieties you're excited about.

**Support off the road.** If you're a supplier, now your sales and tech support teams likely aren't traveling to customers, or at least are severely reducing their visits. So what are you doing to be there for them? How about using FaceTime or Facebook Messenger video chat to interact with them? This way they can still show you their greenhouse/facility/crops and you have the face-to-face interaction. For meetings or conferences involving multiple people, Zoom, Google Hangouts and Google Duo let groups easily conference or video conference. Often that face-to-face contact makes a real difference.

**Electrify some special events.** Had an open house or spring preview scheduled? Get creative! Make a daily video series. Host a Facebook Live event. Create a VIP event for your best customers—use your e-news list and invite them to a special sneak peek of new spring intros. Offer a coupon or special gift if they attend.

**Video your day.** Videos are more important than ever. They can be off-the-cuff, or you can get serious and download some simple video editing software to adjust lighting and make them look more professional. Actually, a

mix of the two is really great because you get a blend of casual conversational style (great for new varieties and specials) and more formal presentation (often better for more academic topics like culture, technical tips, etc.). Distribute through e-blast, e-news, social media and your website. You can host them right on your site if you have the capacity or create a YouTube channel (actually that's often better for SEO results – i.e., how high you rank on Google and other search engines).

**Be positive.** Make sure your communications are assuring. Avoid phrases with a negative connotation. Personally, I dislike the phrase "now more than ever"—to me it implies doom and gloom. Or "in these difficult times"—your customers don't need to be reminded that these are difficult times; in fact, they're probably hearing that everywhere they look right now. Instead, choose your words so that they know you're there for them. Be matter of fact about the current situation. It could be something as simple as "given the current situation" or "as the world is adjusting to how we do business/how business is conducted" or "as we are temporarily facing a new normal." Then go into how they can still count on you.

**Step up social media.** People are spending an increased amount on time on social media currently, plus it's how they connect now that they can't connect in person. Post frequently, invite interaction and encourage social networking. This way they know you're there for them and you're providing a constant for them. These channels are a great way for growers to show customers that it's business as usual—production is still on track, trucks are still moving. Garden centers can invite visitor photos (for example of those new vegetable gardens that they're planting) and maybe even have contests like happiest container or most graceful garden. Keep up morale and add a human aspect with a weekly employee spotlight. (This works for any industry segment.) Anything you can do to personalize your channels encourages engagement.

**A final thought:** In the business, we often call this "crisis communications," but it's important to remember that these are communications strategies you can use in any adverse situation. We encourage our clients to be prepared for any unexpected event, whether weather, fire, flood or illness related. **GT**