

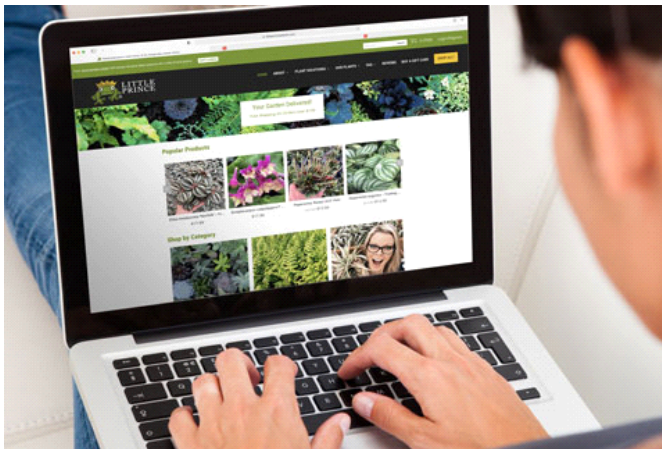
GROWERTALKS

Features

10/1/2021

Service From Every Angle

Katie Elzer-Peters



“We have honestly been surprised at how many new wholesale customers we got when we started offering online ordering,” said Joan Dudney, Marketing Manager for Little Prince of Oregon Nursery.

They launched “Little Prince to Go,” their online retail platform in 2019, mostly to help retail customers locate garden centers nearby and to order online if Little Prince plants weren’t offered at garden centers, but as e-commerce becomes the norm in almost all aspects of life, it stands to reason that wholesale plant ordering would follow.

If you want to offer more convenience to existing customers while attracting new buyers, a well-oiled e-commerce program is the way to go. Here’s how to plan, produce and proceed with a new e-commerce program.

PLAN

“Failure to plan is a plan to fail” is especially true when it comes to e-commerce. You don’t need to produce a doorstop worth of documentation. Tackling these three areas are enough to get started:

Outline goals. At this stage, you’re going to make a list. Ask yourself why you want to offer e-commerce and what you want your e-commerce website to do. Be as thorough as possible in list-making because you’ll refer to this list when looking for your e-commerce platform.

Some sample questions: Do you want to streamline order processing? Take payments? Send delivery confirmation emails? Allow customers to place (draft) orders at any time of the day or night? Take pre-books? Show customers their order history and/or allow them to repeat orders? Communicate up-to-the-minute availability?

Set limits. As important as what you want to do with e-commerce is what you don’t want to do. This list will help you write your e-comm website FAQs. Are there max quantities available for specific items? Do you accept all forms of payment? What are your credit terms? How quickly will you process orders? In what order do you process them (first come, first served, account size, etc.)?

Identify key personnel. If you’re adding e-commerce to your sales flow, one person needs to be entirely dedicated to

managing the program. That person doesn't have to do everything, but the e-commerce manager does need to be the one to understand your entire e-commerce ecosystem and be able to, at any moment, connect people, parts and processes.

For instance, they don't have to be the one to reconnect your ERP to the website if it gets disconnected, but they need to know who to call to do it and what to tell that person to do. They don't have to program software to generate order pick lists, but they need to be able to talk with both the order pickers and the web developer to accomplish the goals.

The e-commerce manager should be a staff position. You might have someone on staff who can be moved (entirely) into this role or you might need to hire someone new. Ideally, the e-comm manager will be good at communicating with all kinds of people, from growers to web geeks; they'll be detail and process oriented—almost to a fault—and they'll be comfortable working with technology, as well as eager to learn new systems.

Another key member of the e-comm team should be a web strategist or digital business strategist. Many businesses skip engaging this type of professional and go straight to hiring a web developer, but if you've never opened and operated a digital storefront, a digital business strategist—especially one experienced working with horticulture companies—will save you time and money down the road. This person should help you refine your goals, help evaluate website platforms, outline processes and help you hire (and, possibly, manage) your web developer (the person who'll build your website).

PRODUCE

Once you know your goals and you've identified key staff, it's time to produce your e-commerce program.

Select your platform. The platform is the software your e-commerce website is built on. You might be familiar with some of them, including WordPress with WooCommerce, Shopify, Big Commerce, etc. There are lots of choices and many different ways the websites can integrate (or not) with ERP systems, email marketing systems and accounting systems. Use the list you created while outlining goals to select your platform so that you make sure the platform you select does what you've already identified it needs to do. If you have a web strategist, they should help you with this part.

Define processes. When you've chosen a platform, you can begin to define processes, such as online order fulfillment, and all of the steps that go into it. Visualize someone placing an order on the website and then document everything that happens to get the items to the customer. Some steps you'll include: receiving the order from the website, prioritizing the order, reserving inventory in the system, printing pick sheets, picking and staging the order, communicating with the customer about the cost, and scheduling delivery or pick-up times. I like creating function flow diagrams (FFDs) so I can see the way the process will unfold. There are free online programs for building FFDs. Just Google!

Build your website. It's important to at least draft processes before building your website because your web developer will need to make choices while configuring software, and your goals and processes will guide that configuration. (Pro tip: We always favor configuring over writing new code. Instruct your web developer to search for an existing solution over creating an entirely new one. Custom code has to be maintained, which means every time your website platform is globally updated, your custom code must be updated, as well.)

While building, make sure to create FAQ pages that help customers learn how to place orders online, what to expect in terms of communication, how to make payments, where to log in, etc.

PROCEED

You have an e-commerce manager, your processes are defined and your website is built. Time to let 'er rip! Follow these three steps for a smooth(ish) rollout of e-commerce:

Communicate with customers (including marketing). There are three types of e-commerce communication: transactional (we've received your order, your order is scheduled for delivery), instructional (here's how you log into your account, here's how you place your order), and marketing (Look what we have in stock! Here's how you use it in the landscape or merchandise it to sell to customers. Place your order now!). All three are equally important to the success of your program.

Regularly review. I said smooth(ish) rollout because every new venture is bound to have a few hiccups. Set a schedule to gather feedback from anyone who touches e-commerce order fulfillment and from your customers. If you engaged a digital business strategist, they can help you with this process, potentially for a one-time project fee every few months and then once or twice a year.

Expand and refine. Make thoughtful changes and improvements to website information, such as product descriptions and photos, needed additions to FAQs and to processes. Keep in mind that changes in processes will impact staff and customers, so plan well before implementing and communicate clearly before, during and after.

There are lots of little details that go into running an e-commerce program, but if you follow this outline and don't skip these steps, you'll be miles ahead of your competitors. **GT**

Katie Elzer-Peters is the owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a digital marketing agency specializing in web development and email marketing for the horticulture industry. Get in touch! katie@thegardenofwords.com.