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Getting a Handle on Your Data

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If there's one thing every single grower in the industry is awash in, it's data. Inventory, production schedules, availability—it's never-ending.

And that's just production. Add in sales and marketing—online listings, email list management, customer management, social media postings (yep, gotta do that, even as a B2B business)—and you can spend all of your time managing bits and bytes. Which is . . . not why you got into this business.

Here's how to manage data so it doesn't manage you: get help.

Write out a short, informational project description

To summarize a data-entry job would be to call it "data handling." The person doing data entry will move data (numbers, photos, descriptions, updates) from one place—possibly the field, possibly a rough Word doc of notes—to another place like a spreadsheet, website back end or email service provider.

There are all kinds of different data-entry tasks for a grower, including:

• Updating databases with inventory quantities, sell-through or crop statuses

• Uploading descriptions and photos to a website

• Updating pricing online or in sales materials

• Inputting customer data

• Scheduling social media posts

• Processing orders

Here are a few examples of short, complete project descriptions:

Order Processing—Daily: Download draft orders from WordPress website and input into inventory system. Print pull slip and give to order packers. Receive packing slip and update order records, including adding tracking number.

Add note to customer CRM record.

Website Updating—Weekly: Retrieve current availability from inventory system and upload to website. Verify that quantities properly update.

As assigned (seasonally): Add new products to (WordPress/Shopify/Nav/VMX) website, including uploading photos (from licensee asset Dropbox), specifying pricing (from pricing sheet), copying and pasting short and long descriptions. Submit to owner for approval.

Social Media Scheduling—Weekly: Retrieve approved post copy from Google sheets social media calendar and pictures from Dropbox links in calendar. Input into scheduling tool (later.com/Hootsuite/Tailwind) by copying and pasting copy, adding hashtags, inserting bio links and uploading pictures. Submit to marketing manager for approval. All collateral will be provided.

What makes these short project descriptions meaningful is that they include this information:

• Other personnel involved

• Software used

• Frequency

Some data-entry specialists will work in spreadsheets all day long, but won't touch a website and vice versa. Even this small amount of information allows helpers to self-select into or out of consideration for your job.

Find a data-entry specialist

Once you have your project description, you can find your person. Data-entry specialist sounds fancy, but it's really not. "Specialist" doesn't have to mean "expensive" or "hard to find." In this case, take the word specialist literally. Find a person who's good at and enjoys data-entry tasks, and one who can work within your system.

When creating a job posting, in addition to the project description, include these bullet points as necessary skills and qualifications:

• Attention to detail

• Experience working with (list software: WordPress, Excel, Google Sheets, Microsoft Nav, GSuite, Microsoft Word)

• High school diploma or equivalent

• Proficient with computers

• Prompt communicator

Post your job. In the horticulture industry, it's a good idea to post the job to your website so that you can share it on LinkedIn, and in various industry groups and forums. Data entry doesn't necessarily require hort experience, though; it likely requires more tech experience. You're also going to want to post it on Upwork.com.

Upwork is a marketplace of contractors that can handle any type of remote work needed. Sign up for an account and follow the prompts. When hiring, look for a contractor that has 4.8 stars or higher and a minimum of $5,000 in earnings completing tasks similar to yours.

If you're able to get the contractor the software access and data they need, I guarantee you that you'll have a better experience with a remote contractor that's a specialist than with someone onsite that doesn't know what they're doing. Experienced freelance contractors will have established a way to work on these types of projects and you'll

be able to follow their lead.

Complete a sample project

Whether you hire locally or remotely, it's a good idea to give the data-entry specialist access only to the documents and software they need to complete their tasks, and then work through a sample project. Let's break that down.

Limited Access: For matters of security, only give individuals the level of access they need in order to do their job. That might mean view-only access to a Google sheet and a website account with "contributor" access rather than "admin" access.

When possible, create new user accounts for each person accessing software or documents stored online. That way it's easy to revoke access. Never offer the admin password, because if contractors or staff depart, you'll have to make sure it's changed or re-shared.

Sample Project: Before committing to a long-term arrangement, provide some training and have your specialist complete a batch of data entry. This could be scheduling 10 social media posts or updating five website products. Track their time on task (TOT) to get a good idea of how long it will take them to complete the job.

Once the sample project is completed satisfactorily, you can create a longer-term engagement with accurate compensation. Getting a TOT and using that as a guideline ensures that you don't run an open money faucet for hourly work. If you establish a TOT of 15 minutes per social media post schedule, you'll know something needs to be addressed if the specialist starts clocking 30 or 45 minutes per post. Maybe they're having trouble accessing resources? A deviation from the norm doesn't always mean they aren't doing their jobs. It might mean they need something from you.

Establish a schedule and stick with it

The biggest reason businesses get frustrated with contractors is that the businesses don't manage the contractors. Data-entry specialists are people, and as such, they need check-ins. Even if someone is merrily completing all tasks requested of them, make time to talk on the phone or Zoom at least once a month. Give them information about how the job is likely to continue or to change. Alert them of upcoming increases in work and ask them if they have the bandwidth to accommodate.

In addition to check-ins, spend some time reviewing the work (QA) and giving feedback. If the specialist alerts that 20 products have been added to the website, go look at them. Spot check to ensure everything is correct. Provide feedback—"Great job! It all looks correct," or "Almost there—make sure to test all links."

When you've experienced a successful project with a data-entry helper, you'll never go back. The amount of time it will free up for you and your staff is incredible, and the work the data-entry specialist can accomplish will allow you to allocate more resources toward growing your business. **GT**

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