





Deck Your Site

**Ahead of a busy
December season,
make sure your
website is optimized
for holiday sales.**

BY BRUCE WRIGHT

SHUTTERSTOCK/LIGHTFIELD STUDIOS & AGNES KANTARIK

Before the pandemic, maybe you thought of online marketing as a chore, even a necessary evil. Maintaining a website, an email marketing campaign, a social media presence? Obligatory, yes, but not not really where you wanted to spend your time.

Today, online marketing is your foundation and default mode of communication. With stay-at-home orders and a general reluctance on the part of consumers to go out and shop in person, a trend that was already accelerating prior to the pandemic has jumped to warp speed. One report found that ecommerce sales in one month alone, May 2020, exceeded the entire online holiday shopping season for 2019.

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With the December holidays nearly upon us, and Valentine's Day shortly thereafter, having a robust and competitive online presence is more important than ever. That's why the Society of American Florists devoted an entire day to the topic during its Reinvention Summit in July. In five separate presentations, followed by question-and-answer sessions, digital marketing pros shared their expertise.

"The pandemic has forced a lot of new people to start shopping online," noted one of these experts, Sundaram Natarajan, CEO of GotFlowers, providers of a cloud-based point-of-sale system for retail florists. "Flower shops are now pressured to compete. But if you invest in the online business, any flower shop can compete with the biggest guys on the internet."

Enrich Your Website Content

On your website as on social media, content is king — original, engaging content. And creating that content is something only you can do. You may get help from employees or professional writers, but it's important that your content be unique to you and authentic to your business. (The Society of American Florists has resources that you can use to build up your social media toolkit. Find out more at safnow.org/moreonline.)

For many florists, the idea of writing about themselves and what goes on in their shops, taking photos, even appearing in videos, is intimidating. Fear not, said Jamie Adams, marketing director for Flower Shop Network: "This is digital storytelling, and it's no different than what you do every day in your store. Every day, you make connections with customers. You build rapport by talking to them, answering their questions."

Those questions and answers are a good place to start, she said. Write them down and incorporate that content into your website on an FAQ page, in your "About Us" section — or even as a part of your product descriptions, including descriptions of daily and weekly specials.

Just as you keep your in-store merchandising current with the season and for upcoming holidays, your website content should likewise take its cue from the season and expand on it. "You need to be current," she said.

Another way of being current is, of course, to address your options for contact-free delivery and pickup and the measures you are taking to protect both customers and employees during the pandemic. Many websites today have a banner at the top of the landing page that provides a link to a separate page that explains all of the business's COVID policies.

Make It Real

Make it personal, Adams urged: "Give your business a face. With COVID nowadays, we all feel like we're trapped, and we are not making the connections with people that we used to. So, with your digital storytelling, you really want to make people feel like they're engaging with you as a person."

Give your customers some behind-the-scenes photos and stories. "It's a good time to beef up your About Us page," she said. "Take a picture of your delivery driver and give him or her a bio. Talk about what they love to do when they're off work, but also how they love to keep the van clean and sanitized." Profile your designers and show them at work.

"These don't have to be perfect pictures; they can be candid shots," she emphasized. While you never want to show yourself or the business in a way that comes across as unprofessional, it's better, in fact, if your storytelling is clearly authentic, not rehearsed or trumped up.

Just as your website can bring customers into your store for a virtual visit, your physical store should support your website, she said. Be sure that signage publicizes your website (and your social media presence). Merchandising in both arenas should be consistent. Remember that your website is your digital store and should mirror your physical store. The two need to support each other in every way.

Make It Visual — and Original

Of course, eye-catching photos are crucial to your efforts, and here florists are lucky: You work with beauty every day. Your photos of arrangements should meet a minimum standard of professionalism, showing the whole design in a clean, well-lit area with a neutral background.



But authenticity is important here too, said Adams. You need to showcase your own design expertise: "We all use stock photos from our various website providers, and there's nothing wrong with that, but enhancing those photos and products with what you create will help tell your brand story better."

You want customers to see your own work, of course. But there's another reason for unique photos: Search engines can detect duplicate content, said

Natarajan. "The challenge faced by the search engines is, which is the original? Who should be listed first? It doesn't help them give you priority when they try to match a buyer to your business."

In addition, search engines visit your website regularly, looking for new content. "If you upload new designs each week, you will see that not only does your web traffic improve, but your ranking also improves in the search results," he said.

Make Checkout Easier

The task that customers face in ordering flowers online, especially as a gift, tends to be more complicated than it is for other items, noted Joe Vega, cofounder of the online florist directory Lovingly.

"The checkout process for a flower shop is two and a half times longer than for a regular ecommerce website," said Vega. And that's a problem. In a study by Baymard Institute, a checkout process that is overly long and complicated was the third most common reason why customers choose to abandon their carts, cited by 21 percent of respondents.

As part of a flower-shop website checkout, customers typically have to enter not only their own information but also a recipient's information, which they may not have on hand. They also have to write or choose a card message — for many, a challenging proposition. Vega suggested a few ways to simplify the process. If the customer's navigation has already indicated what the occasion is, don't ask for it again. If the customer leaves a required field blank, the website should alert them right away, instead of at the end of a long form, so they do not have to scroll up and find it, then scroll back down. And if the customer wants to send flowers to a recipient's workplace, for example, and knows the general location but not the address, the website can provide a lookup via a link within the site itself, so the customer doesn't have to open a new tab.

Offer help with the card message. "This is literally the area in which the highest abandonment rate exists," said Vega. "A floral gift is an emotional expression, but it's very difficult for a lot of people to find the right words." In addition to standardized options, he suggested, offer "memory triggers" like "The thing I love best about you is..." or "The first time we met was when..." A little nudge can help customers find satisfaction in writing their own messages.

Speed It Up

Have you ever grown impatient waiting for a website to load, and then simply given up? It's not uncommon. But a faster speed doesn't just make your website more inviting and efficient. Speed is also a critical factor Google uses to rank search results, said Vega. (How fast is



your own website? Google PageSpeed, a free and easy tool, lets you test any web page URL, offers results for both mobile devices and desktop, and tells you how to interpret the score. Check it out at <https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights/>.)

Google offers some suggestions for how to improve the speed. "There are easy ways to do it, but you have to have the knowledge and the tools," said Vega. You will probably have to put pressure on your website provider to make it happen.

In with the Old

We all know that keeping an old customer costs less than recruiting a new one. That's just as true online — and in fact, email and loyalty programs remain the best strategies for retaining customers, online or off. Both are aspects of website design and online marketing.

Email marketing might seem old school, but it's effective, with 74 percent of customers expressing a preference for communicating with their favorite brands by email, according to Kirby Ryan, senior director of Teleflora's eFlorist program. It's a low-cost channel that gives you flexibility in response times: You can reply to messages in lulls or potentially with help from someone not even in your shop. It's also relatively easy to manage and design, with many out-of-the-box solutions offering some customization.

Within the program that is included with eFlorist sites, email has been driving around 20 percent more orders this year than last, on a same-campaign basis, he noted. And good email and loyalty programs not only keep customers coming back but also contribute to customer referrals and positive reviews.

With loyalty programs that reward customers for a certain volume of orders, there is plenty of opportunity to get creative with redemption options. Ryan suggested: "You don't always need to give a flat discount or dollar-for-dollar benefit." On key holidays like Christmas, Valentine's Day or Mother's Day, you might want to offer a reward at a future date in exchange for flexible delivery on the holiday. Some programs have been successful with gamification strategies, where customers bank points that can be redeemed (like airline miles) not just for cash value but for upgrades or experiences.

Reviews: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Yelp is the online platform that a lot of florists love to hate, acknowledged Brandis Johnson, senior marketing manager at Teleflora. Could paying for a premium profile on Yelp help with scrubbing negative reviews? Maybe, but don't count on it, she advised: "Yelp is meant to be transparent. They believe in objectivity versus curation. Therefore, inherently, they are not the best to work with in terms of getting a review removed."

But while you may not like Yelp, you can't ignore it, Johnson said: "If you have a review that you think is unwarranted, address it from a customer service perspective. Maybe try to bury it under good reviews." In any case, the more reviews the better, said Ryan — both good and bad.

One way to garner more and better reviews is simply to increase your communication with your customers, said Natarajan. He suggested sending a pre-delivery picture when a design is done, with the message, "Your design has been completed and it's on its way."

"We've seen shops get five, six reviews a week from this practice," Natarajan reported. While it might seem to be inviting a last-minute critique of the design, or a request to make changes, most customers are pleased and impressed with the service. As an additional benefit, you have created a digital photo archive, so that when the customer calls again and asks, "Send what you sent last time," you can look it up.

You can take the photo with a cell phone, but you should send it through store email (not from your cell phone number). At holiday times, when you are very busy, you can turn the service off if you need to, but a better solution is, if you make 50 similar holiday specials, take just one photo and you're done. 🌸

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