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How to Know More About Your Online Audience

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It is becoming increasingly essential for garden centers to understand the impact of the internet on their businesses. Five years ago, a Texas A&M study found that 85 percent of consumers indicated they would be willing to visit a website that provides more information on how to care for and maintain a container garden.

Another study found that nearly 28 percent of U.S. consumers searched for gardening information at least once in 2007; of those, more than 50 percent searched for information at least weekly. The study also highlighted that there are differences in gardening-related searches by age and marital status.

Results of these studies show that there is a potential for garden centers to increase sales by taking advantage of mobile technologies. In a 2011 survey, the researchers in this article sought to compare smartphone and internet usage of gardening consumers to those of consumers at large. Specifically, they compared consumers who searched online for gardening and non-gardening related information as well as those consumers who made online gardening and non-gardening related purchases.

The online survey of U.S. and Canadian consumers included questions regarding smartphone ownership, frequency of internet usage, the incidence of mobile and desktop Internet-based information searches and purchasing habits of gardening and non-gardening products. The researchers also looked at overall smartphone usage and then examined the role of demographic and behavior variables of those who searched or purchased gardening products.

A total of 2,511 consumers completed the survey. Only 47 percent of the study participants had searched for gardening-related information using any means to access the internet. Average gardening-related expenditures in the six months prior to the study were \$103.97, with 18 percent indicating they had not made any purchases at all. Nearly 55 percent had purchased something online (either from their smartphone or a computer) that was not gardening related, but only 18 percent had purchased something gardening-related from an online source.

Insight On Education And Gender Trends

Results from this study indicated some interesting patterns in consumer behavior, especially when looking at gender and income.

- Higher education levels were positively connected with both online searches and purchasing behaviors. In other words, higher education may be associated with greater knowledge about certain features or characteristics of gardening products, which would allow for online purchases without much time spent searching for information using smartphones.
- While females are relatively similar in their online search behavior for both gardening and non-gardening products, males are more likely to make the actual purchase (for gardening products) online. Females are more likely to search for gardening products, but less likely (compared to males) to make an online purchase. This may be partially explained by a relatively larger portion of female shoppers at brick and mortar garden centers (i.e., females tend to search for information using smartphones, but prefer shopping at brick and mortar establishments). In contrast, males were more likely to make an online purchase and less likely to search for information about gardening products.
- The most compelling finding was the link between online searching and online purchasing for non-gardening and gardening information and products. Having searched online for non-gardening information increased the likelihood of an online non-gardening purchase by 16 percent, while the likelihood of purchase increased to 19 percent for online gardening-related searches.

Steps To Improving Digital Engagement

Based on these survey results, there are several steps you can take to improve digital engagement with your customers, and perhaps seek out new ones.

- Know your audience. Ask them through your Facebook page, or in your newsletter, if they use the internet for searching or buying products. If they are, ask if they normally use a desktop computer at home or a smartphone.
- Having relevant and compelling content on a website that can be easily accessed by both mobile and non-mobile devices has the potential to increase online purchases substantially. Look closely at your site and how it is organized.
- Does your site have e-commerce? If not, perhaps that will be a direction to move in the future.
- Keep on top of these trends and recognize their potential. Shifts in digital innovations and marketing happen quickly, so make sure you don't fall behind.

A Few Surprises From The Survey

There were a few unexpected results the researchers found in analyzing results from their survey.

- Compared to participants living in rural areas, participants who lived in metropolitan or suburban areas were less likely to seek gardening related information online. One reason for this could be that metropolitan and suburban living allows quicker access to local stores, thus causing relatively less need to search for information using smartphones.
- Having more income reduced the likelihood of making gardening online searches, which the researchers did not observe for non-gardening searches.
- Being of Caucasian descent slightly decreased the likelihood of seeking online gardening information, which was not consistent with the results found from previous studies. This may be an indication that online information is potentially reaching a new market segment.

How To Maximize Smartphone Use

More consumers are using their phones to search for gardening information or make purchases. As this trend continues to grow, you want to make sure your site and your products are easy to find for them.

Here are three tips on how to take advantage of the growing number of people using smartphones:

1. Make sure your site is mobile-ready. Very few people want to look at your normal web site on a small screen. A quick Google or Mashable search will offer several tips on how to make this happen.
2. Track the number of customers you have who use their phones for web searches compared to their desktop computers.
3. Consider the development of an app. This can make finding information about your garden center just one click away.

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