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5 Social Media Best Practices That Can Help You Increase Sales

Today, seven out of 10 Americans use social media to share information, find entertainment, and engage with businesses (Pew Research Center, 2017). Social media have become an important information source for Millennials; yet, Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are significantly increasing their use of Facebook and other social media platforms.

Among social media platforms, Facebook remains the most popular with almost 80 percent of online adults, followed by Instagram (32 percent), Pinterest (31 percent), LinkedIn (29 percent), and Twitter (24 percent).

Social media influences how Americans purchase products and services, so it is proving to be a powerful — and inexpensive — marketing tool. Businesses can use social media to increase their online exposure, attract new customers, highlight new products or services, hear what customers and potential customers say, and (most importantly) *build relationships*.

Given the popularity and convenience of social media, we would expect that green industry business are actively engaging customers through Facebook and other platforms. However, the [2016 Small Business Marketing Trends Report](#) found that many U.S. businesses are not using social media for their marketing activities. Reasons may include that business owners perceive that social media is time consuming and confusing, or they simply do not understand how to use it.

This publication highlights the profile of green industry businesses using social media and provides social media best practices to manage your social network platforms more effectively.

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The Survey

To understand how green industry businesses are using social media for advertising, we surveyed operations across the country and gathered information about their business practices for calendar year 2013. Green industry businesses include three main categories:

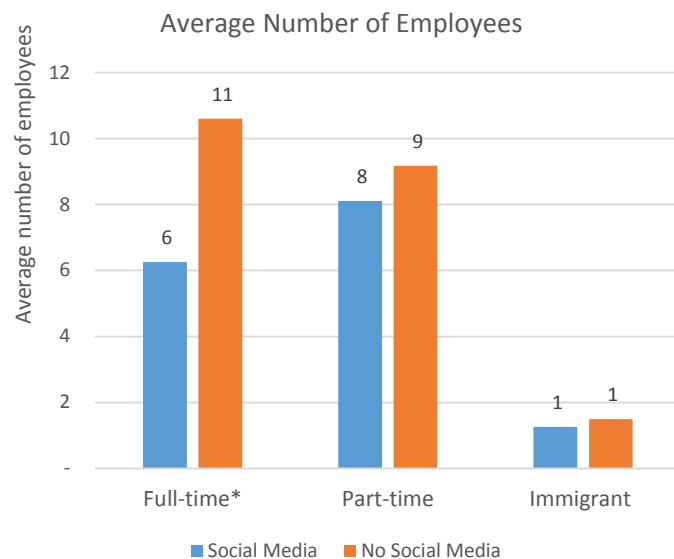
1. Nursery, greenhouse, and turfgrass producers
2. Landscape firms
3. Wholesale and retail distribution firms

Our survey targeted 32,000 firms. Of these, 15,000 randomly selected plant grower or grower/dealer firms received the questionnaire mailed via the U.S. Postal Service; 17,000 firms with email addresses received the survey via email.

We received 2,657 responses. Of these, 571 businesses (22 percent) dedicated a percentage of sales for social media marketing, and 2,086 operations (78 percent) did not engage with their customers via social media. The survey asked green industry businesses about product type, product form, sales method, advertising, factors determining prices, and factors impacting business growth.

The Findings

Figure 1 shows the average number of hired full-time, part-time, and immigrant employees. Businesses that use social media reported significantly fewer full-time employees. Establishing and using social media requires a change in the traditional advertising and selling processes, which may be easier to achieve in smaller and more flexible businesses

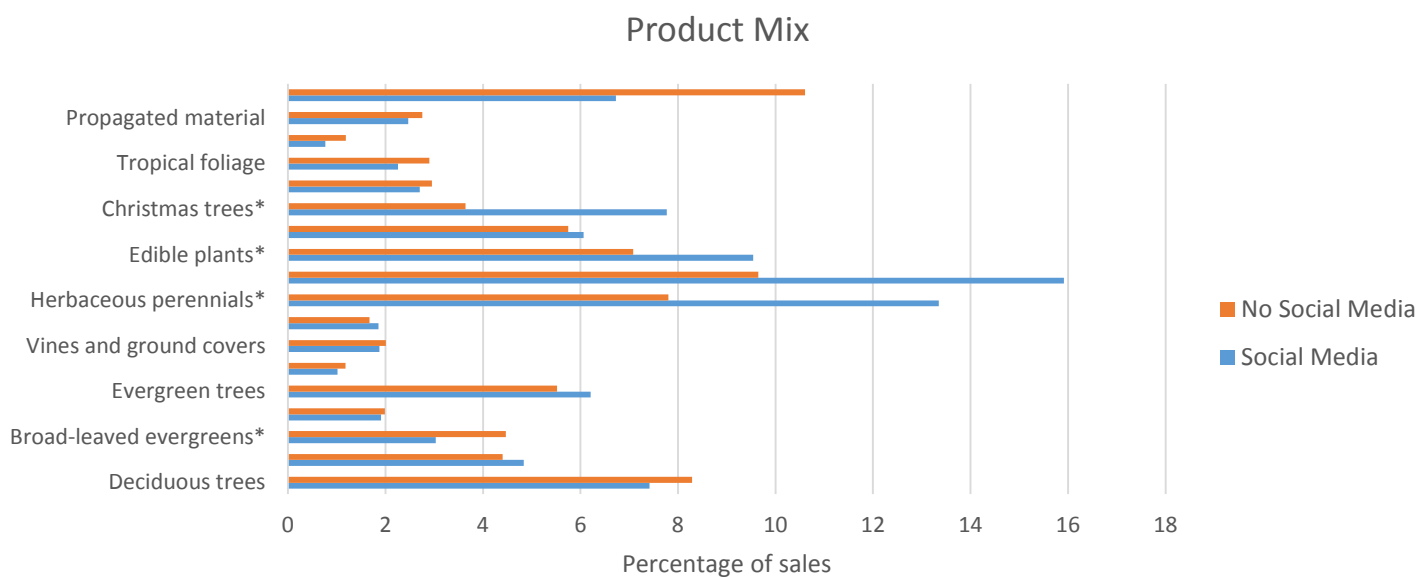


Businesses using social media tend to have fewer full-time employees.

**Denotes that the value between businesses using social media and those that do not is statistically significantly different.*



Use social media to communicate the benefits and attributes of your products.



Businesses using social media tend to offer a different product mix than those not using social media.

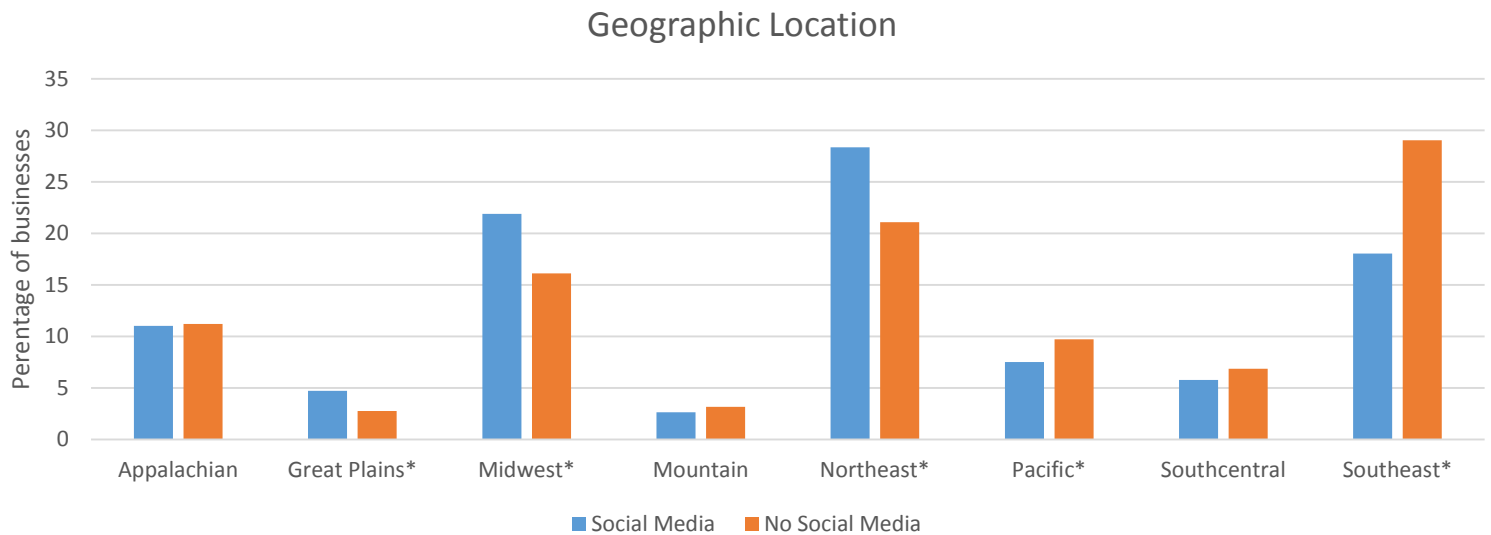
**Denotes that the value between businesses using social media and those that do not is statistically significantly different.*

The average business that uses social media reported fewer dollar sales, fewer sales under contracts, fewer years of operation, and sell to shorter distances. However, these differences were so small that they were not found to be significant. The percent of discount sales and brokered sales were slightly higher for business that use social media; but again, the differences were not statistically significant.

Figure 2 shows that on average, businesses that use social media sold more herbaceous perennials, bedding plants, edibles, and Christmas trees compared to businesses that have no social media advertising. On the other hand, social media businesses sold fewer broad-leaved evergreen shrubs and other plants. The survey also showed that more businesses with social media advertising sold more containerized plants (67 percent) than those who did not use social networks (56 percent).

We investigated the managerial ability of the business owner by constructing a Herfindahl index developed by Gollop and Monahan (1991). The index captures product and market diversification among businesses using social media. We found that businesses using social media had greater degrees of market and product diversification. Social media may be helping businesses diversify their market outlets and provide a wider selection of products to different market segments.

Figure 3 shows that business location highly influences social media use. More businesses use social media in the Great Plains, Midwest, and Northeast than their counterparts in other regions. It seems that social media can help businesses to draw customers and followers outside their region. This is especially true for businesses located in areas with fewer large population centers. Alternatively, there are fewer businesses located in the Pacific and Southeast regions that advertise via social media.



Adoption of social media for marketing purposes differed across business location.

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Using social media to sell

Social media can help a business attract followers and convert them to customers. However, just using social media is not the same as using social media *effectively*. Effective social media marketing requires businesses to connect with the right people, construct a detailed marketing strategy, treat followers as if they were face-to-face customers, and offer contests, giveaways, and events to convert followers into customers.

Below we offer five social media practices to make sure you are taking advantage of these powerful marketing tools.

1. **Align your priorities.** Use the SMART framework to define the goals you want to achieve with social media. For example, you may want to gain 25 new followers on Facebook in the next two months or create at least three Facebook events that generate at least \$1,000 in sales in the next two months. Alternatively, you may decide to incorporate Twitter in your strategy to provide excellent customer service or increase brand or product awareness in your community. Your goals will guide you to track and evaluate your marketing activities.
2. **Create a brand for your social media platforms.** The content (particularly the visual elements) that you post are key to building your brand in social media. Create a logo that represents your company and use it across all platforms. Use the same color palette or filter for your photos consistently so your followers recognize your business across all networks. Use your bio, profile, and cover photos to communicate who you are and what your company does better than anyone else.

SMART is an acronym that can guide the goal setting process. SMART stands for **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime bound. In other words, your social media goals should be focused, quantitative, realistic, worthwhile, and have a target day.

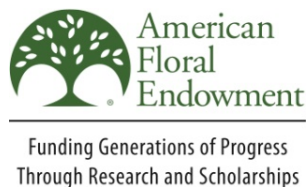
Use *#hashtags* for keywords that highlight your business values, products, events, campaigns, and industry. Hashtags can help you increase engagement, raise awareness, and categorize content.

3. Choose your network. You may feel the urge to jump into every social media platform, but we recommend that you instead find the network that aligns with your customers' profiles. Your business has unique customer segments with unique demographics, psychographics, and behavioral characteristics. Understand what social media your current and potential customers use to align your ads, events, and content. Each platform has its own strengths and provides a way to reach a unique clientele. For example, Instagram is helpful to reach younger generations via photos while Twitter is great to provide exceptional customer service. One of the best ways to start social media marketing is (the oldie-but-goodie) Facebook. Make sure you fill your business page entirely, make your photos look good, and use their analytics and ad tools. Once you feel comfortable with Facebook, you can diversify and expand to other platforms by testing the waters in Instagram and Twitter.

4. Be consistent. As with any business project, social media requires you to commit time and resources. Post messages daily and at the time when your followers are around to see them. Discover the best time to post by understanding the demographics and locations of your followers, then track the engagement of your posts at different times of the day.

As soon as you start using other platforms, you can save time by scheduling your posts in Facebook or by using social media management tools such as [Hootsuite](#) and [Buffer](#). Your posts should help you build relationships with your customers by providing relevant information, by replying to comments or questions immediately, and by using events and promotions to engage.

5. Keep it real. Consumers want to buy products that have a direct impact on their communities. Tell followers your family business story, share your values, and highlight the impact of buying from your business. Post behind-the-scenes photos to communicate the passion you put in your business. Pose questions to your followers and inspire them to talk. A great way to tell your story is to post videos of your activities, events, and campaigns. Fill in your posts with words and photos that express the DNA of your business — your reason for existing. Convey what it is that you do better than anyone else, and be visible and loud as if you were next to your customers.



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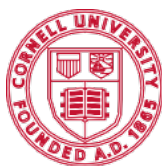
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