

HorticultureWeek

Social media key tool for garden centre growth, says panel

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Effective use of social media and a hands-on approach to community engagement are two of the most important tools garden centres should be using to grow their businesses, according to a panel of garden retail and web professionals.



Retail sales

HTA director general and Garden & Leisure Group operations director Carol Paris led a seminar at Glee earlier this week highlighting how social media and community activities can be used by garden centres.

She said: "The need for better social media and community activity by garden centres is fuelled by a number of increasingly important market factors. Consumers are engaging with concepts such as the Big Society, the green agenda and environmental issues, and user-opinion tools such as TripAdvisor. 'Pester power' is more important than ever in influencing parental opinion. All of these trends can be tapped into by garden centres, using tools and initiatives that really speak to today's consumer."

Panel members Sarah Dumont and Alan Murdoch of Fermoy's, Alan Down of Cleeve Nursery, David Stewart of Dobbies Garden Centres, and Pete Doyle of social media specialists Social Retail, gave an insight into their community and social media campaigns.

The range of community initiatives run by Fermoy's has included school gardening competitions, a charity cycle ride and a celebrity-endorsed scarecrow competition linked to a local food festival. Sarah Dumont said: "Our community-related activities are an incredibly important promotional tool for Fermoy's. We have even been able to cut our advertising budget by a third, whilst seeing a five per cent increase in sales. Such initiatives take some organisation, but they are incredibly worthwhile."

Alan Down highlighted Cleeve Nursery's Edible Bus Stop project. Taking inspiration from the concept of 'guerrilla gardening', the 10-strong Cleeve team works with local volunteer teams to grow food on

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wasteland along a local bus route. He said: "The Edible Bus Stop aims to change the world one bus stop at a time. It shows how even small garden centres can be active in their community, creating lots of media coverage and educating consumers about gardening along the way."

David Stewart outlined Dobbies' Here We Grow campaign involving local charities and community groups, and its monthly children's club, Little Seedlings. "We have introduced a 'community champion' into each of our branches," he said. "The projects they lead help us to build local relationships and engage with both children and parents."

Dobbies also secures extra take-up of its community initiatives by running Facebook and Twitter campaigns. "Social media is an excellent channel for both promotional messages and customer feedback," Stewart added. "For us it's as much about building people's long-term interest in gardening as growing direct sales."

Pete Doyle of Social Retail has been working with Hillier Garden Centres to introduce Twitter at each branch. He said: "With appropriate training, designated Hillier Planteria staff have become not only comfortable with the concept of Twitter, they have also established a thriving Twitter community that has led to increased plant sales and stronger customer relationships. It is important for garden centres of all kinds to recognise that although they can't control every element of social media, there are massive advantages that should be embraced."

He also highlighted Pinterest as another, fast-growing social media opportunity with the power to enhance garden retail sales. He said: "With Pinterest garden centres can take pictures of their new ranges or individual products, for other users to pin to their image boards. It's a good way for retailers to share their latest ranges and generate valuable word-of-mouth. The purpose of social media for garden centres is local engagement, and building local communities. Used as an extension of your PR and marketing activities it is a very useful tool."

Link: www.hortweek.com