

Spring-Green Lawn Care's President Mows Down Traditional Online Marketing



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Like it or not, we live in a digital age. Everything is Twitter this and Facebook that. If you're an entrepreneur -- and if you're reading this, you probably are -- there's the temptation to digitize everything you do. James Young, president of the Plainfield-based Spring-Green Lawn Care, maintains that

while you don't need to embrace every new tech trick introduced, you do at least need to be aware of them and use the ones that make sense.

To wit, Young's lawn-care business largely interacts with its customers via mail marketing -- something that's usually not even thought of in 2011. It's still a healthy marketing approach, though: Not as sexy as Twitter, but since it's more targeted, in some ways it's more effective. I gave Young a call to discuss this very concept, as well as the challenges his company faces to stay current and relevant in a world obsessed with technology.

How does direct-mail marketing fit in an age dominated by social media? Does it fit in?

James Young: For us. We're a service business and I believe the customer trades the value of their time for money. The value of getting back some time to do something else.

Social media to us is more about loyalty and retention than it is about acquisition. In other words, there isn't this natural place or metric for us to go into social media channels and talk about lawn care. There isn't a cult-like following or community around people who want to outsource their lawn-care to somebody because, quite frankly, it's counterintuitive.

The idea is I don't want to worry about it so I'm going to hire somebody to do it, so why would I want to be in any community setting for it? I don't want to deal with it.

In other industries like Wild Birds Unlimited, a franchising company that's a great organization, they have people who want to be involved in their hobby. So social media is a great way for them to connect with each other. Cardinal bird followers to cardinal bird followers can compare notes and feed and all those those things that drive interest. In our business, there isn't an interest to begin with.

Social media for us is to just better understand our customers. We like to make sure we understand their thoughts and appreciate them helping us grow our brand. But it's not a part of our direct-mail strategy.

Are there techniques from direct-mail marketing that folks in online-only businesses could adapt?

JY: I think the answer is probably, but I don't know that social media is viewed as a channel for acquisition at the moment. People do a lot of research on the Internet, and part of that is understanding the perception of the brand. That might come out of the social channel. But you think about how many hits you receive off an e-mail blast that come to your website but don't go through your e-commerce solution, but when you backtrack to those individuals, you find that you made a sale but they picked up the phone and called you.

Different demographics respond differently. We've done some Facebook ads, and even Groupon is a big thing, right? Those are social communities to my mind. A little unproven and a little difficult to forecast for our business. I hear a lot of good things about the restaurant business, where people need to go out to eat dinner and have to make an instant decision. In our business there's a little more seasonality, a time of year that makes sense. The weeds that show up, the beautiful dandelions that we have here in the Midwest tends to motivate people. So if we don't have to give away 50 percent of the margin, I'm probably not going to jump on those mediums. I think that's where the viability hasn't really played out for us. We have to watch if those customers who buy through those channels will be retained.

We tend to like direct mail. It's very transactional. You have to go with an aggressive promotional offer. We can target it and it's focused. But we absolutely need to provide all the different demographics with the vehicle to come back to us. Whether that's a blog where they have questions and I can answer them... we're not quite to live-chat, but we're certainly looking at it. Social is still a very small part of our overall campaign.

What are some other challenges you're facing now?

JY: We're always working to get better. Sometimes that is challenging, especially as you're competing with yourself and you're competing with yourself coming out of a recession. We're not happy with mail conversion the last few years -- this year was certainly a much better year. But we have to recognize how much the economy is playing a tremendous influence on mail's performance. Is it the package? Is it the offer? Is it the timing? Is it the creative? Or is it simply the economy?

If you can get some benchmarks, it makes recessions and things much better when you realize you're ahead of the pack. "Our competitors are backsliding and we're growing in a down market." Or, "We're flat, and our competitors are backsliding 30 to 40 percent and we should feel good about how smart we've been in order to maintain our client base."

That's the challenge with entrepreneurs right now, is we have all these evolving marketing channels including social. We're looking at QR codes the other day. What a cool little application, right? I don't necessarily believe that applies to our demographic who buys our service today, but I still think it's a cool technology. So we'll apply it to a marketing piece that we send to existing customers. We've got it pointed at YouTube videos that explain the benefits of our additional services.

I would guess that's gonna be a small part of my current demographic, but you always have to be at the forefront of these things. Like social media, we're there. We'll do some testing in it, but we're not going to rush and change a substantial amount of our marketing spend away from our proven channels into these new areas.