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by MARIA ZAMPINI

'Social media has opened up an entirely new window of opportunity to communicate with customers. Or should I more accurately say communicate to customers?'

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In this day and age, everyone is looking for an edge over their competition. And because this economy has us pinching our pennies more than ever before, we're trying to do more with less. Presumably that means working smarter — but not necessarily harder — in all aspects of our business.

An obvious business goal is to promote your products and services to as many customers and prospects as you possibly can. There are times you want to target certain customers, so you use a rifle. At other times you want your information to reach far and wide, so you use a shotgun approach. Either way, social media has opened up an entirely new window of opportunity to communicate with customers. Or should I more accurately say communicate *to* customers? Good question.

My dad has always preached to me that first impressions are the ones that count. A good example of this is answering the phone. Your receptionist can be the best (or worst) salesperson at your business. He or she will set the tone for how your company is perceived.

Last week I talked with Nancy Motz of Motz & Son Nursery in Portland, OR. Now there's a woman who knows the right way to answer a phone! Although it was the first time I'd spoken with Nancy, I immediately knew she was my kind of gal. Anyone who can go to work every day with a loveable old coot of a father who's still your best friend and mentor (just like my dad and I), well, she is A-OK in my book!

I asked Nancy for her e-mail address, and to my surprise, she didn't have one. She explained that they don't have e-mail or a Web site. They feel that with those modes of communication they don't get the best connection, as they lose one-on-one contact with their customers. Hmmm ... I understand her point of view, and it made me start thinking.

Ironically, this week I also participated in the annual Garden Writers Association and Scotts Miracle-Gro Web teleconference. This year the topic was "Sustainable Urban Gardening: Creating Habitats for Plants, Wildlife and People." One of the

panelists was Kevin Coyle of the National Wildlife Federation, who reminisced about how as a child he'd leave the house and spend the entire day outside with his friends. I chuckled as I recalled similar experiences of my own. Then he presented some unbelievable — more like disturbing — figures about how kids spend their time nowadays:

- unstructured outdoor play = 30 to 50 minutes per week;
- organized sports = four hours per week; and
- indoor "screen" time = 53 hours per week.

Kevin claims this is leading to a loss of social and interpersonal skills. Very interesting, no?

So, today's catchphrase is "social media." To me this encompasses everything from Web sites and e-mail to Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Flickr, blogs and more. But — and I am dating myself here — I went to school just as the computer age was starting, so I find that the new technology can at times be totally overwhelming.

In fact, I was a little unnerved when, on a recent evening newscast, it was reported that the Library of Congress is keeping records of Twitter messages. Can you believe it? I guess they see it as historically documenting conversations in this day and age, much like preserving the letters of our Founding Fathers. They stated that tweets — messages sent by Twitter — are less than 140 characters,

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and soon there will be "nano-tweeting" with only 70 characters. *Yeesh!* Only 70 characters? It makes you wonder: Why tweet at all? What could be that important that it can be condensed to so very little? Is it even worth saying?

Luckily enough, I belong to the Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association (ONLA) and the American Nursery & Landscape Association (ANLA). Both of these groups have provided me the guidance I need to begin to navigate through this new world of social media. The ANLA's online Knowledge Center offers an entire section of what I would call "Social Media for Dummies," and it's chock full of step-by-step instructions. It covers the what, why, when and how you and your business can utilize and benefit from the different forms of social media. I've only begun to work my way through the abundance of instructions and insight, but this one feature will more than pay for my membership dues. Just this one thing! Ya gotta love a good return on your investment!

Then, I was in Columbus a couple weeks ago and visited the wonderful ladies at the ONLA headquarters. ONLA interim executive director Jennifer Gray helped this has-been (as ONLA past presidents are affectionately referred to) by setting up a one-on-one tutorial on Facebook and LinkedIn with communications intern Caitlin Ward.

Not only was my time with Caitlin totally informative, it was also extremely enlightening to hear the thoughts and opinions of a Generation Y'er. Here was someone whose college experience included Facebook as a daily way of life. Through our chat I was also able to gain insight on what she and her friends expect as consumers of gardening goods and services.

With all of the above events occurring in such a short time span, it really did give me cause to stop and consider communication with — and to — customers. While I'm of the opinion you have no choice but to seriously consider how to best utilize social media as a business tool, I think we can't forget about the "old" modes of communication, such as a simple phone call, a handwritten note, visiting a customer face-to-face or even faxing. After all, there is something to be said for having something tangible in your hands.

I think to be successful you need to do even more than you've done in the past. But in doing so, we need to remember that nothing beats one-on-one communication — or the personal touch, if you will.

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