



DITCH THE '90S LOOK

Take your garden center's image from '90s-style fashion fail to fashion forward with a professional, functional website

By Leslie Finical Halleck

As life has gone digital, your customers are making many of their purchasing decisions based on your online presence... or lack thereof. So, what does your digital presence say about you? Is it a good reflection of your ideal customer and current business? Or does it make you look like you still wear acid wash mom-jeans? As a whole, our industry is lagging behind in the digital world, especially when it comes to our websites. There are a lot of you out there still wearing acid-wash mom jeans, at least digitally. If you don't see a problem with that, then we need to have a chat!



DIY disasters

Many of us are still trying to hobble along and build our own website in our “spare time” because we just “don’t want to spend the money.” It takes only a fraction of a second to identify these websites online, because they *look* like they were built in 1998. They may look like they’ve been pieced together in a template, they’re clunky, the style is dated and they may not have been updated for years. What information is there is often cluttered and overwhelming. The bottom line is, your bottom line can’t afford a static, unorganized, dated website. Your website is your number one most valuable marketing tool. So ask yourself, have you invested what you should in your website both in time and money?

The bones: look, color, text, images and navigation

Contemporary, polished and professional: That’s what a good website should project in terms of appearance. Remember, you want your site to properly reflect both your ideal customer and your company. Your website is most often the first impression your customer gets of you, and it may be the only one they ever get.

If your website is unattractive and dated, most visitors will quickly move on without investigating what you have to offer. With the overabundance of information and choice available online, none of us have time to waste on a poor visual experience.

Color is important. Be sure to choose two or three main colors that coordinate with your branding and logo, then you can complement them with neutrals.

Keep text easy to read. In terms of the content portion of your website, black or dark colored text on a white background is the most easy to read. Trying to read white text on a black background instantly gives me a headache.

Images are crucial, but keep them organized. Never-ending pages of photos or graphics will cause a visitor to jump ship. Organize images into easy to use galleries that are simple to navigate. *Always* use high quality photographs or graphics.

If you plan to offer a lot of content, be mindful of the layout and navigation. Be sure to have simple and clearly defined sections so that it’s easy for a visitor to quickly find the content they’re looking for. Bury items too deep and chances are no one will ever see them.

The meat: content, content, content!

Now that you’ve got your style down, it’s time to address substance. You may have heard that “content is king” these days. A static website that never changes just doesn’t cut the mustard anymore. Static websites are like a digital bookmark that most people will forget they ever used. Customers want you to engage and teach them before they’ll make the decision to buy your products or services. Basically, you have to add the title “publisher” to your job description.

Content can come in the form of a blog, downloadable articles, photo galleries and video channels. Relevant, useful information that inspires confidence in your customer that *you’re the expert* should be your goal. Educational and inspiring content is what can help you increase your *perception of value* in the marketplace.

Keep content fresh

Update your website content *regularly*. Be it blog posts, photo galleries, video channels and the like, be sure to continually add content to each channel. At least one or two blog posts a week can help drive traffic to your site and give you plenty of information to disseminate across social media.

Posts or videos don’t have to be lengthy to be effective. In fact, readers will most likely abandon long-winded posts. If you found you’ve written a dissertation on a topic, split it up into multiple posts



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Create a website with a fresh, clean look to make navigating it easy for customers.





to get more mileage out of it. One or two minute videos are perfect. Photos with blog posts are an absolute must. Most readers will skip blog posts with no photo.

Boost SEO with quality content

Chasing successful SEO can sometimes feel like herding cats. What is SEO? Search Engine Optimization. It's what you do to make your website more attractive to search engines like Google. It used to be you could pay to manipulate search return results or load your site up with keywords to gain high rankings. That is not the case anymore. *Quality content* is what search engines are focused on these days. Google ranks your site based on the amount of shareable quality content it contains.

Drive customers to your website

Remember, you don't own your social media accounts. Don't use your Facebook page as the primary home for all of your intellectual property. Your goal should be to use social media platforms to drive people back to your website or to your business.

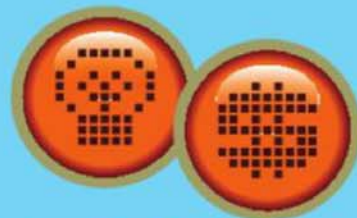
Your website should be the primary hub for all your dynamic content. I like to call it your "content piggy bank." Then, you can digest that content into separate pieces and distribute it throughout your social media channels. When viewers click on those photos in Pinterest, or a link in Twitter, it takes them back your website where they can indulge in your content and your products.

You get what you pay for

Don't go cheap on your website. Spending minor pocket change, one time, to build a good website isn't realistic. However, this seems to be a very common expectation across our industry. After your site is built, be prepared to re-invest time and money in regular maintenance as well as technology and design updates. Work website expenses into your annual budget so that you don't fall behind the curve.

Your new website must be compatible with all modern browsers to be useful. Also, make sure you build a "responsive" site. That means that your site can be properly navigated no matter the mobile device someone is using, be it a smart phone or a tablet. There are many outdated website platforms out there. Pre-made template sites can also look dated and your site may end up looking just like someone else's. Be sure to investigate contemporary platforms before you decide on one and a web designer. Many designers are still using WordPress, but there are

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Here are a few questions to ask yourself when evaluating your website:


- ➡ Does the appearance say "fresh" or "dated"?
- ➡ When was the last time the entire site was re-designed?
- ➡ How often do you upload new content?
- ➡ Do you give your customers a reason to come back and visit more than once?



FOR MORE in-depth discussion about these points, listen to the podcast "Get your website out of the '90s" on the Retailer Radio Network.

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newer content platforms to choose from. Personally, I love Expression Engine, but you should do your homework to see what best fits your needs.

Remember, your website is your digital storefront: Make sure to treat it with as much care and attention as you would your physical storefront. 

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Does your website have a consistent look across different browsers and devices?

