

How Small Farms Can Use Blogs to Increase Business

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Introduction

According to the USDA, the majority of farms in the United States are small farms, those farms that sell less than \$250,000 (USDA, 2005). Over ninety percent of the farms in Florida are small farms (USDA, 2007). In order for small farms to be economically sustainable, reliable revenue generation is a must. Effective marketing is the best way to generate sustainable revenue.

Effective marketing requires a marketing plan. Such a plan is essential for a small farm. A marketing plan describes the process to be used to take products grown on the farm and sell them in the marketplace in an efficient manner. A good marketing plan will include the cost of production and the addition of a profit in the selling price for all goods produced on the farm. The plan also describes what cash flow is expected back to the farm along with the expectation of a profit.

A good marketing effort can help differentiate your company, or products or services from others with similar offerings. This effort at differentiation is called branding. The creation of a good or memorable brand can influence customers to prefer your offerings from other companies. A good brand is a way to make your business unique or stand out from among many competitors. A brand creates an identity that allows your customers to relate to or identify with your product offerings. Brand awareness, developed through marketing, is an effective tool to help small farms generate new customers through word of mouth. One useful marketing technique to create and reinforce brand awareness is the creation and use of a blog.

What's a Blog?

The word blog is derived from the two words **Web log**. A blog is a specialized type of website that allows an author to make regular short comments, called "posts," usually about a specific topic. These entries are usually displayed with the latest post at the top of the page and the oldest post at the bottom.

Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function more as personal online diaries. In addition to text, a blog may contain images, audio, video, and links to other blogs and websites. Some bloggers post new entries daily, some several times per week, others post less often. Shorter, more frequent posts are preferable to longer, infrequent ones.

Virtually all blogs allow the readers to leave comments, although the author may, at their discretion, turn that capability off. Most blogs also include the option to moderate, or approve, comments before they're posted. A good blog may be thought of as an online conversation, led by one or more authors, and involving many people.

As of September 2008, blog search engine Technorati was tracking more than 130 million blogs. Blog readership is estimated conservatively at 50% of those using the Internet.

Why Should a Business Use a Blog?

A business blog offers a number of benefits to many businesses, including small farms, if used properly. The primary benefit of blogs is that they allow a business to engage existing and potential customers in an informal conversation in ways that traditional marketing simply doesn't allow. In essence, blogs allow you to have a conversation with your customers. Once engaged in a conversation with your customers, you can gain a better understanding of who your customers are along with some insight into their needs and interests. This information can help determine how to better market to your customers, develop new products or services, or refine existing ones.

Blogs also allow a business to demonstrate the strengths and expertise of the business in ways that traditional advertising doesn't allow. A good business blog will use a personal, informal "voice" to engage customers in the conversation. A blog can also help make your company appear more "alive" and approachable. Using a blog as though it were traditional advertising to "sell" customers is a doomed effort. Very few people like to be "sold to." They do like to engage in conversations and to hear information in a story-type format. Make your entries personal by speaking to readers directly in a conversational way. Tell them the story of the business, your products and services, and your employees.

How to Start

Blogs are inexpensive. Many are free. Two widely used blog publisher sites that have templates to get you started blogging in minutes are www.wordpress.com and www.blogger.com. They are also relatively easy to set up and update. Be sure to check entries before they're posted for grammar, typos, tone and consistency.

Consider sharing the duties. Blogging requires a time commitment. Sharing the blogging duties with others in your company can take the pressure off. Plus, multiple voices can make a blog more interesting.

Above all, make your blog useful to your customers. When you offer helpful tips and links to other resources on the web, your readers will be more inclined to tell others about your blog. For instance, have you read a new book that's relevant to your readers' interests? If so, write a short review of that book in your blog. If your blog is an information resource for your industry, other bloggers and website owners will want to link to it. And the more sites that link to your blog, the more likely it will show up near the top of search engine results.

Relevant keywords are the words your customers would use to describe your products and services. Use relevant keywords throughout your blog. Don't use industry jargon. Speak to your customers using their vocabulary. This is another way to boost your blog's chances of showing up at or near the top of search engine results.

Stick to it. If you decide to start a blog, make a commitment to keep it going. An abandoned blog won't give readers a favorable impression of your company.

Summary

1.6 billion people are now connected to the Internet. That's 24% of the global population. (Internet World Stats) A blog opens your business to those people. A blog makes your message and brand visible to anyone on the Internet. Even small farms can have global visibility and global visitors. A blog offers the possibility of connecting to some of those people and converting them into buyers. This should be viewed by a small farm in the same way as though a visitor dropped by their farm or roadside stand. Not everyone who visits will buy. Some simply want information. Some want nothing more to see what you are selling or chat for a bit. But everyone that visits is a potential customer.

Ultimately, a blog can be a highly effective and low-cost marketing tool for differentiating your business from the competition and encouraging customer loyalty. All that's required to be a successful small farm business blogger is a commitment, some planning, a little creativity, and, most importantly, something worth saying.

References

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