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# Relationship Marketing: A Qualitative Case Study of New-Media Marketing Use by Kansas Garden Centers

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**Abstract:** A primary factor limiting the expansion of many Kansas garden centers is marketing. Most of these businesses spend the majority of advertising dollars on traditional media (newspaper, radio, etc.). However, new-media tools such as social-media can be an effective method for developing profitable relationships with customers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of garden center stakeholders as they use new-media to market their businesses. Grunig's Excellency Theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. Results indicate garden center operators prefer to use traditional media channels to market to their customers and asynchronously communicate with their target audiences. Stakeholders often have inaccurate or conflicting views of traditional media and new-media in regard to advertising and tend to approach new-media marketing from a public information or asynchronous viewpoint.

**Keywords:** marketing; relationship marketing; social-media marketing; new-media marketing; green industry; qualitative; garden center; nursery; landscape

## 1. Introduction

The green industry (garden centers, nurseries, landscaping companies, etc.) generates over \$200 billion in annual revenue [1] and employs over 450,000 workers [2]. However, the retail garden center industry is highly seasonal and competes with many outside influences that can negatively affect sales, such as poor weather and competition from mass merchandisers [3]. According to Hodges et al. [4], mass merchants have acquired almost half the market share from smaller, local garden centers. Although mass merchants can offer prices that local garden centers cannot match, consumers are sometimes willing to pay higher prices for the increased selection, higher quality plants, and expert knowledge offered by small garden centers [5].

One factor limiting the expansion of garden centers and nurseries within the Great Plains region is marketing [6]. Insufficient funds for marketing is a common problem with smaller retailers who must try to find ways to generate maximum income potential with limited marketing and advertising budgets [7]. Small, family farms that have a yearly revenue not exceeding \$50,000 rely heavily on marketing directly to the consumer [8]. Family-owned garden centers are no exception and have traditionally invested the majority of advertising dollars on the Yellow Pages, print media, and direct

mail [6]. Such print material most often includes newsletters and direct-mail promotional pieces that seek to educate consumers about sales or offer coupons for seasonal goods.

Although direct marketing of agricultural goods to the public has proven profitable with an association of increased sales [9], a limited marketing budget can prove detrimental to direct-mail marketing because the potential to reach the desired target audience is limited by the resource capital the business is able to allocate to the campaign [10]. Even though direct mail has limitations, such as a low response rate [11], it is still a highly popular resource [7] that can increase the volume of customers [12].

Incorporation of new-media marketing tools such as social-media has made it possible for businesses to communicate and engage directly with current and potential customers while building relationships [13–15]. Establishing a direct line of back-and-forth communication allows consumers to feel their feedback is valued and recognized, thereby increasing the probability of customers engaging in word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing via the digital sphere and physical circles [13]. Ultimately, WOM relies upon community engagement, and in today's digital age it is vital that garden centers create an interactive web presence that can be accessed across multiple platforms in order to facilitate consumer demands and promote WOM [16].

Many businesses are transitioning away from single-channel and passive marketing campaigns and have adopted more interactive strategies that encompass a wider variety of marketing channels [17]. Multiple-channel marketing (MCM) allows businesses to use specific media to market directly to a target audience [18]. Companies must recognize the wide array of channels that can influence consumers, including television, radio, magazines, and online sources. Organizations are starting to focus more on the possibilities of new-media marketing [19].

Businesses that decide to participate in MCM strategies must carefully consider the most efficient and effective channels [18]. Efficiency focuses on the cost per impression or the ability of a channel to reach consumers as economically as possible. In order to do so, marketers must have a clear and full understanding of its unique customer base. Multiple channel marketing must also be effective and yield high sales and positive brand image [18]. Modern businesses are using multiple traditional and new-media channels to market to consumers. Ultimately, the decisions on which channel to use are often the result of organizational tradition and “gut feeling” rather than statistical proof [20].

Marketing campaigns via new-media are free or low cost, and if used correctly, could lead to further promotion [21]. Properly integrating social networking tools can have a positive impact on sales, powerfully establish a company's brand, increase the salience of the business, position the company positively within the community, and reduce advertising costs [22]. However, sufficient and effective measurement practices must be implemented to determine if social-media marketing is successful and yielding a positive return on investment (ROI) [23,24]. Such measurement programs should focus on a social-media marketing campaign, and its ability to raise brand awareness, generate sales, produce customer advocacy, or encourage word-of-mouth marketing [25].

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of garden center stakeholders in the Great Plains region of the USA as they use social-media to market their business. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews of Kansas stakeholders explored the following research questions.

- Q1:** What are garden center stakeholder's perceptions and attitudes towards new-media as it relates to the marketing of their businesses?
- Q2:** What barriers do stakeholders encounter when using new-media to market their businesses?

This qualitative study is informed by Grunig's [26] Public Relations Theory. Grunig [26] categorizes four models of communication that businesses and public relations (PR) practitioners rely upon: (1) press agency; (2) public information; (3) two-way asymmetrical; and (4) two-way symmetrical communication. Model one, press agency, is the least desirable and model four, two-way symmetrical, is the most desirable form of communication. Grunig offers these models to help classify how a business or organization approaches and practices PR.

Press agency is narrow in focus. Practitioners of this form of communication are primarily concerned with disseminating information on the company's products and increasing brand awareness [26]. Companies that practice press agency are not bound by truth, and all communication is asymmetrical and focused on a one-way transfer of information. There is no desire for feedback or understanding the customer through strategic research. The public information model evolved from the press agency in that it focuses on the release and distribution of truthful information [26]. However, the flow of information is still one-way from the organization to the consumer. Unlike press agency, there is some effort given toward understanding the receiver of information through items like surveys [26].

Model three and four are considered the more desirable models of PR [27]. Model three is the two-way asymmetrical approach. While this form of PR evaluates feedback from a company's target audience, the goal of communication is strictly focused on persuasion and convincing the public to either accept a specific point of view or coerce the consumer to purchase a particular product [26].

The final model is two-way symmetrical communication, and "research shows this model is the most ethical . . . and effective approach to public relations" [26] (p. 308). Two-way symmetrical communication establishes constant communication between the business and all stakeholders to mitigate conflict. Businesses do this by understanding the needs and wants of stakeholders to "improve understanding and build relationships with publics" [26] (p. 39). Additionally, small-scale operations are more likely to use two-way communication practices [26]. In the digital sphere, two-way symmetrical communication can help organizations because listening to consumers via social-media allows a company to improve its products and more effectively target potential customers [28].

## 2. Materials and Methods

This case study used six in-depth interviews with participants from four garden centers. The six participants (Table 1) were two more than the minimum number needed for a qualitative study as identified by Creswell [29]. The participants at each garden center (Table 2) included the owner and/or the employee most responsible for social-media marketing content. All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects/Institutional Review Board for Kansas State University (project #7183) on 19 May 2014.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of owners and employees at four garden centers in Kansas that were engaged in social-media marketing for their business.

Participant Description	Store
Employee A works at garden center A. She graduated from Kansas State University with a degree in landscape design and took a class in general business marketing. She is the sole landscape designer for the garden center and is also the marketing manager. She uses Facebook and Pinterest for her personal social-media.	A
Owner A owns garden center A. He spent the majority of his career farming. However, when faced with the difficulty of finding a way for the farm to support his children and his retirement, he decided to build a garden center. He does not use social-media in his personal life.	A
Manager B is the general manager of garden center B, and he oversees all of the marketing. Manager B does not use social-media for personal use.	B
President C is the fourth-generation manager of garden center C and received a master's degree in business administration. His current role is president of the garden center. He oversees the operations and marketing of the garden center. He uses Facebook in his personal life.	C
CEO C is the third-generation manager and is the current CEO of garden center C. He identified his primary responsibilities as helping with daily operations, preparing new-media content, and taking pictures for marketing purposes. He operates two blogs for the garden center and has a personal blog.	C
Owner D, of garden center D, works alongside her husband. Her primary responsibilities are with customer service and education. She is also the sole manager of the Facebook page and is in charge of television and radio advertisements. She uses Facebook in her personal life.	D

**Table 2.** Characteristics of and marketing channels used by four garden centers in Kansas.

Store	Description	New-Media	Traditional Media	Facebook Stats
A	Garden center A is located in Northwest Kansas. There are two other satellite garden center business locations in Nebraska. In addition to offering retail plant material to customers, the garden center also offers landscape design and construction services and does approximately 20% of its sales online through eBay or Amazon. The center is owned by one individual.	B,E,F,G,H,P,T	Radio Billboards Newspaper Direct mail	916 likes 0.07% engagement rate
B	Garden center B is located in Eastern Kansas, and was established in the 1950s. It has gone through several ownership changes. The primary revenue source for the garden center is in retail sales of plant material and gardening supplies such as fertilizer and weed killer.	E, F	Radio Newspaper Direct mail	818 likes 1.3% engagement rate
C	Garden center C is located in Southcentral Kansas, and is in its fourth generation of ownership. The primary focus of this garden center is in retail sales split across two locations in Wichita. In addition to retail plant supplies, the garden center also runs a gift store and a microbrewery store.	B, E, F, I, P, T	Radio Television Newspaper Direct mail	5440 likes 0.14% engagement rate
D	Garden center D is located in Western Kansas and is currently in its first generation. The store focuses on retail plant supplies while a year-round gift shop is also a significant aspect of the business.	F	Radio Television Newspaper Direct Mail	844 likes 1.09% engagement rate

Note: B = blog, E = e-newsletter, F = Facebook, G = Google Plus, H = Houzz, I = Instagram, P = Pinterest, & T = Twitter; engagement rate was calculated on 24 October 2014.

A purposively-selected list of 23 garden centers was generated by a state university Cooperative Extension horticultural specialist with expert knowledge of existing Kansas garden centers. To be included in the list, the garden centers had to be located in Kansas, have exceptional products, good business practices, great customer service, and a presence on Facebook. Since qualitative studies focus on validity and generating a large amount of data from a few participants, the original list of 23 garden centers was scaled down to four garden centers. Two garden centers were selected for a high engagement rate on Facebook and two garden centers were selected that had poor engagement rates. The level of engagement was determined by using Simply Measured's [30] engagement metric which is defined as:  $\text{engagement rate} = (\text{comments} + \text{likes} + \text{shares}) / \text{total number of fans}$ . Simply Measured's [30] engagement rate allows accurate comparisons between Facebook pages. Each of the 23 garden center's previous 60 days' worth of posts were averaged and garden centers were ranked from highest to lowest engagement rate.

Participants were immediately debriefed by the researcher at the end of the interview. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and a professor's assistant and were entered into NVivo10 (QSR International Pty Ltd., Doncaster, Victoria, Australia) for coding and analysis to determine common linkages and themes. Glaser's [31] constant comparative method assisted the researcher in categorizing participant responses into relevant major themes. Credibility, reliability, and transferability are essential components and concerns of a qualitative study, and the onus is on the researcher to demonstrate the findings result from data and not subjectivities [32]. Shenton [32] also indicates that compromising internal validity is a critical error in qualitative research. In order to mitigate any errors that could decrease credibility, all data was collected and analyzed verbatim with audio recordings and transcribed by the primary author and an assistant. Additionally, after concluding the interview sessions, all participants were debriefed by a researcher to maximize accuracy of the written data as synonymous with participant perception. The research team conducted face-validity analysis of the interview questions to increase validity of the results. External validity in qualitative research is in the eye of the beholder, and it is up to the reader to determine if the information can be generalized to his or her own socially constructed experiences [33].

Although in-depth interviews can yield rich and meaningful data in exploring the experiences of participants, caution should be used in generalizing the findings beyond the specific units of analysis

under the specific situations in which they were observed [34]. However, qualitative results may be transferable to other like businesses in similar situations.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Q1: Stakeholder Perceptions and Attitudes towards New-Media Marketing

When asked to describe how garden centers market to the public, participant responses yielded two themes: (1) Stakeholders prefer to focus on traditional marketing strategies; (2) Although stakeholders see some positives to social-media marketing, they are skeptical of its ability to positively impact sales.

##### 3.1.1. Stakeholders Prefer to Focus on Traditional Marketing Strategies

Garden center owners and employees indicated a preference for traditional forms of advertising which included television, radio, newspaper, and direct-mail campaigns. Owner D (Table 1), who owns garden center D (Table 2), said, “garden centers are used to being in the regular media.” She continued, “[the] newspaper is timely . . . If I advertise in the newspaper I can get them in here; they will bring the coupon in. No one brings their iPhone in and says this is what I want.” Manager B, general manager of garden center B, mentioned, “we do a lot of radio advertising . . . we can run radio advertisements, and I can quantify how much I’ve spend on it because I have the bills to show for it.”

The vast majority of strategic planning for garden center marketing also focused on traditional media. President C, of garden center C, talked about his advertising calendar:

[it has] the number, date, the Monday through Sunday, how we would run our dates, and then at the top of all these we have what we want to promote and seminars. It’s really kind of like our Bible. It’s got what our spot radio’s gonna run. If we’re going to run a newspaper that week, if direct mail needs to go out.

Manager B also discussed an in-depth level of planning for advertising:

[I will] plan out my marketing for next year. The majority of the marketing will get planned out for next year. [It will include] when I’m going to run ads, when we’re going to do this, when we’re going to do that.

All participants had some form of presence on one or more social-media platforms, with the most popular being Facebook. This is most likely due to the sampling procedures used in this study that drew upon garden centers with an active Facebook page. Other networks used, although to a varying degree, were Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Google Plus, blogs, and Houzz.

Participants at three of the four garden centers identified the preferred method for Web 2.0 marketing was through an e-newsletter. Employee A said, “we send out a newsletter every week to all of our local customers. I like to do the newsletter Friday evening, so I can put the new blog on the newsletter.” Describing his newsletter, Manager B mentioned, “the e-newsletter is something we’ve been doing for several years. That gets [the most] attention. We do that every two weeks year round.”

President C talked about the weekly newsletter and said, “it goes out weekly and [CEO C] writes those articles . . . He’s a good story teller. It’s not just a here-we-are company yelling buy our stuff. He’ll write a story that’s interesting and maybe try to tie a product in with it. It’s about a 350-word read.” The newsletter has a subscription of approximately 15,000 people and is delivered through Constant Contact, Inc. (Waltham, Massachusetts), which is an e-newsletter program.

Participants varied in the degree to which they used social-media and all were skeptical regarding the ability of social-media to generate a return on investment (ROI). However, participants mentioned the ability for Facebook to facilitate WOM marketing. Discussing why his garden center uses Facebook, Owner A mentioned:



We're too rural. We don't have enough people who could possibly drive two hours here . . . I think enough people will come here from enough distance. When they go home they're going to tell their friends about it on social-media. They'll buy from you online because they won't drive that distance . . . It's extremely important to [rural garden centers]. I feel it should be more important to us than people in the middle of the city, because we don't have enough demographics. The population isn't here to support how we want to live . . . To support that business we have to attract people from a greater distance. Social-media is one way to attract people from the urban area.

Owner D also spoke of the ability of Facebook to generate WOM marketing and offered the following unprompted response, "there's no difference between WOM, us talking, and social-media . . . It's the same thing. You're just missing the verbal and non-verbal cues." When prompted, President C also identified social-media could be viewed through the lens of WOM marketing and said, "we could do a better job of building that piece. I think if we were to do that, it would bring some value." Participants indicated a passive strategy for facilitating WOM marketing for their customers, and none of the owners or employees mentioned fostering interaction on social-media to create highly engaged customers.

### 3.1.2. Stakeholders Were Skeptical of New-Media Marketing Return on Investment (ROI)

Although Kansas garden centers are currently using social-media to some degree and believe it could help facilitate WOM marketing, all participants were highly skeptical of its ability to generate a ROI. When asked how her social-media presence affects the profits of the garden center, Owner D replied:

To be able to tell you it has made me one single dime, I can't. I don't have any way to track it . . . [Facebook] has just not been the big boom that I need for me to go spend money on it . . . Social-media sometimes is not a help. It doesn't get me stuff sold because the customer is still outside my store . . . I'm spending a lot of time on [Facebook], and I cannot justify the amount of time being spent on it for the sales [that are being generated].

Other participants had similar viewpoints. When asked how social-media impacts the garden center, Employee A replied, "there's not often direct sales from [social-media]. If there are, they are really hard to track. It's just generating awareness. [The financial impact] is not much, and it is not direct." Regarding social-media being profitable to his business, Manager B mentioned if you post on "Facebook and you don't sell anymore this week than you did the week prior, then obviously it didn't strike a chord with anybody."

### 3.2. Q2: What Barriers Do Participants Encounter when Using New-Media to Market Their Business?

Participants were asked questions related to the challenges they face and what materials would help them improve new-media marketing of their business. Participant responses yielded the following themes: (1) Stakeholders lack time and training; (2) Stakeholders desire high-touch channels of education from experienced professionals.

#### 3.2.1. Stakeholders Lack Time and Training

All participants identified the primary barrier to using social-media marketing was a lack of time. Specifically, stakeholders mentioned other job priorities related to the daily operations of the garden center and the large amount of time educating customers as areas that consume the most amount of time. When asked about her role in the garden center, Employee A stated:

I'm in charge of all the marketing and the advertisements. Other than that, my main role is a landscape designer, which works more with the landscape contractor side of the business. It's all under one head, but it's two very separate branches. We all have other jobs, so

marketing just isn't . . . it's more my job than anybody else's, but it's not my only job nor is it my most important job.

Even though Manager B identified that his role as general manager of the garden center is to oversee and supervise all advertising, he stated, "[my other responsibilities] are 110% everything [but marketing]." When asked how much time he believed social-media marketing would take, he responded, "lots of time . . . and we just don't have a lot of time with it." When prompted to give a quantitative assessment on the time required to effectively market with social-media, Manager B identified "probably five to ten minutes every day."

Participants at three out of the four garden centers felt they were hindered by the amount of time spent educating potential and existing customers. Manager B mentioned helping customers with questions through the phone or via email "sometimes makes up 10% of the day, or 20% sometimes . . . if I kept track it would probably scare me." Owner A offered similar experiences to those of Manager B. "[Educating the consumer] is what I do all day long. It's my job, my biggest role. It's full time. I do more of that than anything else."

All participants identified a feeling of being lost in an ever-changing world of social-media and felt they did not have the necessary tools or training to keep up. Employee A mentioned her confusion with Facebook advertising and posts not being seen by every follower:

They're pushing more and more in a direction where you're going to have to pay for people to see your post . . . It seemed like it costs a lot of money, and we were confused and weren't understanding how it was being used or why we were getting charged . . . it didn't seem to correlate. It was confusing.

Owner D also identified feeling confused when it comes to Facebook updates. She mentioned, "[Getting up to speed] is the biggest problem I have with social-media. I still have a slide phone. When it comes to paid marketing, is that where I want to go?"

When asked about their desired learning method for new-media marketing training, all stakeholders mentioned a desire for hands-on, high-touch channels of education. Describing what the ideal coaching situation would look like, Employee A added: "Maybe a weekly phone call . . . First [call] would probably be a long one to discuss the overall plan and then like the weekly communication on, what have you done this week, what are you working on, and should maybe try this or that. Just someone to kind of [give you] feedback and keep accountability with." When asked to describe his ideal workshop, CEO C explained it would be a workshop where participants would, "take your laptop to the class and sit down. Actually go through the steps and build a website or whatever you're doing. The [goal would be] a finished blog or website at the end of the course".

One common characteristic participants desired with regards to learning about social-media was to seek out advice from people who, as President C mentioned, are "fighting the same fight" within the garden center industry. Manager B identified that he preferred to learn from events at trade shows or industry meetings, saying, "I attend trade shows, meetings, and hear what other garden centers do . . . If I heard something at a conference, colleagues that are doing something similar . . . I would probably connect with that more than anything" President C echoed this sentiment:

I guess there's that sense of trust . . . it's people that are fighting the same fight that we are. That we're able to learn from what they're doing . . . I don't hold a whole lot of credence for those that call themselves a social-media expert just because it's . . . you can't quantify it. I could go out and say that I'm a social-media expert, read a couple books and probably sound like I know what I'm talking about. The people that have actually been there and done that I think to me have more credibility.

#### 4. Discussion

Participants identified a preference and confidence for traditional marketing channels that included radio, newspaper, television, and print media. This proclivity towards older methods

of advertising is in agreement with the findings of Behe et al. [6] and Stone [35]. The preference for older forms of mass communication could demonstrate that garden center stakeholders are contrasting the recommendations of Behe et al. [16] in adopting digital marketing trends to reach the upcoming generation, and marketing strategies have remained the same for nearly 20 years. This could also lend additional support to the findings of Doctorow et al. [20], who identified that decisions for MCM campaigns are often the result of tradition.

Garden center employees and owners were also concerned about the lack of ROI in regards to the time spent marketing on social-media. However, stakeholders were measuring the success of their social-media campaigns by looking at a direct and immediate increase in sales after content was posted online. Since they do not see immediate or direct financial impacts, stakeholders indicated that they do not believe social-media can impact sales. This contrasts the recommendations of Paine [28] who states companies that are the most active on social-media are more profitable than their contemporaries which are not using social-media. Although social-media can have an impact on sales, the greatest impact results from encouraging interaction and developing meaningful and symbiotic relationships [25]. Stakeholders of this study were not focusing on, or measuring, the quality of relationships, level of interaction, or the satisfaction of customers online, which is contrary to the advice and findings of Ledingham [36]. This common perception may indicate that stakeholders are practicing PR through press agency or public information models [26] and not the two-way symmetrical approach recommended. Since the relationship and awareness benefits can lead to profits that are not directly measurable [37], garden centers most likely are measuring the wrong forms of profit or revenue streams and becoming frustrated with the marketing efforts via new-media.

Garden center stakeholders also demonstrated a lack of understanding for traditional media and were not aware of the potential benefits and analytics of new-media marketing. For example, Owner D stated that advertising in the newspaper was “timely”. Furthermore, Manager B had mentioned his preference for radio advertising because he could quantify his advertising reach by determining how much he spent on radio advertising and how it affected the sales for the week. However, new-media marketing is much more rapid in its delivery and response than newspaper, and quantifying the dollars spent on a radio campaign cannot guarantee a consumer has noticed a message. New-media marketing offers advanced analytics that extend beyond simple message reach to include multiple forms of engagement along the online consumer pathway. Furthermore, stakeholders focused on what Keller [18] defined as the efficiency of the advertising message and were not actively tracking the effectiveness of such advertising campaigns. Measurement focused specifically on the short-term sales increase and not the long-term brand awareness or relationship.

Employees and owners were also confused about how to track sales to determine advertising effectiveness. None of the participants indicated asking customers where they heard about sales or promotions or giving any type of survey to determine relevant marketing channels or WOM marketing referrals. This could be especially problematic in tracking the effectiveness and efficiency of social-media advertising and the WOM that comes with it. By not implementing such tracking measures, the participants may never know how effective their social-media marketing efforts are nor how to identify profitable marketing channels to efficiently reach market segments. Although small businesses are more apt to practice two-way symmetrical communication [26], the participants in this study believed social-media should be approached from a public information or two-way asymmetrical communication viewpoint.

The employees who had responsibilities related to social-media had, at best, a split role that involved other garden center duties. These responsibilities quickly overshadowed the marketing responsibilities of the employee. Since “success on social-media is contingent on considerable resources being allocated to the proper use and evaluation” [38] (p. 4), it is possible to conclude stakeholders are seeing little ROI on new-media because they have not fully committed the resources vital to success.

Garden centers are approaching new-media marketing from the same lens as mass communications advertising. The stakeholders identified that they were taking a “broad net” approach



to new-media marketing where they send a message out to numerous receivers and hope that results in a purchase. However, this approach of treating new-media like mass communications is in violation of Warshauer and Grimes' [39] findings, which state that social-media should be used for fostering individualized communication and interaction.

Employees and owners stated the majority of their time is spent educating customers through e-mail, phone calls, or in-person conversations. This level of personal interaction could indicate that garden center employees and owners are practicing two-way symmetrical communication offline as an organization. According to employees, customers appreciated a high level of service. However, that level of service also prevented participants from effectively marketing the store because educating customers represented a considerable portion of their time. The stakeholders within this study also had a lack of understanding regarding scheduling and publishing tools for new-media marketing. Only one participant mentioned Hootsuite (Vancouver, Canada) or the scheduled posts feature on Facebook, and she did not use these features. Participants were not actively seeking new information but were not opposed to learning about new-media marketing. If they are going to learn, they expressed a desire for high-touch channels of education from seasoned industry professionals.

## 5. Conclusions

This study offers several theoretical implications for Excellence in Public Relations theory and how garden centers approach PR in the digital sphere. Grunig [26] identified a two-way symmetrical model of communication as the most effective means of communication between stakeholders. Since social-media is an effective avenue for conducting research and communicating to customers [24,28], this study adds to the body of literature and theory by suggesting that engagement and interaction on social-media could diminish when businesses are not actively participating in two-way symmetrical communication online and do not understand the value it offers beyond direct sales. New-media marketing could garner additional business over time by building a loyal customer base.

Garden center owners and employees should consider implementing principles of two-way symmetrical communication in new-media marketing, and approach it not as a sales tool but, as Constandinides and Fountain [13] describe, a medium for communicating and engaging directly with potential customers in order to build relationships. In doing so, stakeholders may harness the power of new-media to generate deep involvement with customers. Because customer interaction on social-media can be profitable [40] and WOM can reach an enhanced volume of potential customers for minimal costs [21], using new-media channels could help garden centers that are hindered by resources or geography to reach new target audiences.

Participants also identified using MCM, which included new-media, to reach their target audience. However, the bulk of their efforts focused on traditional marketing that included radio, television, newspapers, and direct mail. Although new-media marketing was used, it was often an afterthought. The popular response for why the stakeholders emphasized traditional media was a mixture of tradition and feeling like they could quantify traditional media. However, stakeholders were not using any form of analysis to determine the effectiveness or efficiency of their marketing efforts. Although stakeholders may be reaching a large number of their target audience via direct mail, radio, and television campaigns; they could be neglecting a very important demographic by ignoring the potential of new-media marketing, which is becoming more vital as traditional forms of media become increasingly segmented. Therefore, this paper recommends that garden center owners and employees implement measurement programs to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing efforts and not rely on traditional or intra-organizational culture to make marketing decisions. Communicators should work to reach this market of garden centers to educate stakeholders on the value of new-media marketing.

This study recommends that future research focus on consumers' perceptions and preferences toward new-media marketing. Since educational and relevant content is paramount to consumers,

we recommend identifying content that garden center customers desire as well as which aspects of relationship marketing resonate most. Future research should also identify which new-media platforms are yielding the greatest ROI in regards to increased sales, increased reputation, and increased relationships. Lastly, studies should focus on strategies that are being implemented by garden center stakeholders, how customers perceive those strategies, and how such activities can improve customer loyalty and foster meaningful relationships.

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