

Michigan Retailer

STRATEGY WINS!

Vermeulen's Furniture thrives amid pandemic

Cancelled! Robinette's advice on surviving a backlash

Tips on refreshing your digital campaigns

Guide to hiring summer help

While there's no question the pandemic has been challenging, for Vermeulen Furniture, however, it's been one of their best. Story on page 8.

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12



16



10

ON THE COVER



STRATEGY WINS!
page 8

The Vermeulens have been in the furniture business for three generations. Despite the pandemic, the past year has been one of the company's most successful.

Contents

FEATURES

- 10 CANCELLED!**
Surviving when your business is a target. Robinette's Karey Robinette offers guidance on navigating consumer blowback
- 12 REFRESHING DIGITAL CAMPAIGNS**
Elevate Marketing President Katie Saglimbene offers ideas on keeping content fresh
- 14 HIRING SUMMERTIME HELP?**
Keeping younger workers safe throughout the season

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 FROM THE CEO**
Without accepting risk, it is impossible to enjoy what life has to offer
- 5 NOTE FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK**
Go forward! Keep moving!
- 6 LEGALLY SPEAKING**
Protecting consumers and maintaining your customer base
- 7 GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS NEWS**
Lighter version of normal
- 16 IN HER OWN WORDS**
Jennifer Stehouwer, shares how her part-time, high school job flourished into a career and passion as owner of Ball Park Floral & Gifts
- 20 CATCH-ALL DRAWER**
News from around the state that affects your business
- 22 NEW MEMBERS**

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Accepting a world full of risks

We live in a world of risk, yet for the past 12 months, the entire world has collectively locked down in an attempt to reduce the chance of contracting COVID. While certainly not a fool's errand, it has undoubtedly changed our psyche and our perception of what constitutes *reasonable* risk. What started as a two-week pause turned into a year-long exercise of executive power. With businesses still operating under capacity restrictions, and children (including my own) still attending virtual school, the question becomes, what constitutes a reasonable amount of COVID risk, because the answer cannot be zero.

Despite the availability of several vaccines, COVID is likely here to stay and become an endemic (a disease that continues to circulate globally in certain areas for years). However, draconian government restrictions cannot last indefinitely, and our world must return to normal in order for our economy to thrive. But will individuals (and retail customers) be ready, willing and able to accept some level of COVID risk after riding out a global pandemic?

We accept risk everyday, whether it is driving, flying, scuba diving or skiing. Each activity could result in serious injury or death, yet we weigh the consequences and proceed. Usually we're not even making a conscious decision, the risk is merely an accepted element of the activity. We take steps to mitigate danger, whether it is wearing a seatbelt, helmet, or in this case, a facemask, but life as normal proceeds.

Both Michigan Retailers Association and Retailers Insurance Company accept risk each day as part of their respective business models. For MRA, we accept chargeback risk. This fiscal year we'll process approximately \$1.4 billion in customer transactions for our merchants. Some transactions become chargebacks, and uncollectible chargebacks can be a liability for MRA. For RIC, we issue workers' compensation insurance to our policyholders. By its nature, insurance is an



assumption of risk. Both companies continued full operations during the pandemic, even though both chargeback exposure and workers' compensation liability increased.

From day one of the pandemic we've reassured Michigan consumers that shopping is safe. Of course no activity is devoid of all perils, but shopping is a necessary part of our lives. As we emerge from a lost year, I hope all Michiganders will feel comfortable acclimating back to normal life and reassuming some risk.

Without accepting risk, it is impossible to enjoy all that life has to offer. For example, in early February, the Hallan family ventured to Florida for a few days to visit my sister and parents. While we were there, we took the kids to Legoland (for the boys) and to Universal so my daughter could get her rollercoaster fix (which she gets from neither her mother or me). The five of us crammed into a hotel room and spent more time than we should playing hopscotch around our suitcases. Upon our return, I remarked to my daughter that "wasn't it nice that we were home and had our own space to spread out." She replied, "yeah, but I kind of liked it." She cherished the close quarters and that quality family time that we never would have had if we didn't accept some level of risk.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William J. Hallan'.

WILLIAM J. HALLAN
MRA President and
Chief Executive Officer

Go Forward! Keep Moving!



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*“Whatever we
are feeling,
we need to
get busy
living again.”*

Spring forward! Spring Ahead! Think Spring! Spring Fever! Or my favorite, Spring is nature's way of saying, "Let's Party!"

Somehow the typical epithets used to describe spring seem to take on a whole new meaning this year. All of these bright and sunny phrases conjure up images of hope, renewal, and awakening. This year, when I think of spring, I keep hearing a war hero's voice in my head yelling, "Go forward! Keep moving!" Let me explain. Throughout the pandemic like a lot of Americans, I've watched my fair share of TV. I tend to watch a lot of documentaries and historical dramas. This past Veteran's Day, the History Channel aired one of my all-time favorite series HBO's *Band of Brothers*, about the history of "Easy" Company, part of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division and their campaign in Europe during WWII.

There's a scene in one of the episodes where Easy Company faces an intense battle near Foy, Belgium where the leading officer, Captain Winters, repeatedly instructs his troops to "Go forward! Keep moving!" as they faced heavy artillery strikes from the Germans. You can actually feel the stress of the soldiers as they make their way under heavy fire, facing difficult odds.

When I think of spring and everything that's happened over the past year, hearing Captain Winter's urgent voice yelling, "Go forward! Keep moving!" seems to make sense. Yes, we are inching our way to the other side of the pandemic. As I write this, it was announced this week that stores can increase capacity to 50%. That news and the increased effort to get more Michiganders vaccinated sooner are steps in

the right direction. As welcomed as that news was, all of us are a little battle scarred. We all want life to resume as we remembered it, but there's a feeling of hesitation in the air. *Is it safe to leave the house? Is it going to feel weird being around a group of people?* Not to sound too dramatic, but for me, it feels a little like emerging from a shelter after a storm.

No one has to tell you this. As business owners, you've lived the struggle. We've heard repeatedly that many family-owned and independent Michigan retailers are barely hanging on. Yet, whatever hesitations we may be experiencing, we need to go forward and get busy living, as Morgan Freeman said in another one of my favorite movies, *Shawshank Redemption*.

Within the pages of this month's issue, we focus on stories that help you to get back to work with ideas on refreshing your digital marketing efforts, surviving a consumer backlash, hiring summer help, and inspiring stories featuring the Vermeulen family in an industry that's experienced some incredible growth this past year. And our latest *In Her Own Words* feature, we highlight Jennifer Stehouwer, who owns Ball Park Floral & Gifts in Grand Rapids. It seemed appropriate to highlight a florist in spring, who like many of you, has faced a hard year and is anxious to get back to working at a pre-pandemic pace.

So, it's time to get out of the yoga pants, open the windows, and run towards brighter days. In other words, go forward!

If you have suggestions on future articles or feedback on what's been published, I'd like to hear it. Send me an email at jrook@retailers.com.

Got a business question? Try this: Ask Us First!

At Michigan Retailers Association, we're always looking for ways to help our members. We get plenty of inquiries on how to run a business or navigate state agencies. That's why we launched a campaign to remind members to Ask Us First. Instead of getting stuck on hold with a state department or finding yourself searching the internet, call or email MRA with your questions and we'll

get you an answer or at least send you in the right direction.

We have legal, governmental, retail, insurance and technical expertise on our staff. Why not take advantage of it? Questions will be answered by the MRA team, including General Counsel Tom Clement, Vice President of Government Affairs Amy Drumm and our President and CEO Bill Hallan.

Send us your questions two ways:

- Call 800.366.3699, or
- Email askusfirst@retailers.com



Protecting consumers and maintaining your customer base



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“...all business owners should be mindful of the prices they are charging relative to their competitors.”

Spring is one of my favorite times of the year. The sun emerges, warm weather activities are on the horizon and the feeling of a fresh start generates a positive and optimistic attitude. This year has many of us feeling even more optimistic than usual. Many retailers have been in survival mode for well over a year. As the winter months set in, we braced for a predicted surge of COVID-19 cases and the possibility of additional shutdowns. But retailers proved yet again that they could remain open for business and ensure public safety and the dire predictions never came to pass. Now, with spring upon us, vaccines being widely distributed and businesses of all kinds slowly ramping up their capacities, many businesses are hoping for a slow return to “normal” operations.

As retailers continue taking the steps necessary to defeat COVID-19 we realize that normal has a different meaning. A year ago many brick and mortar retail shops were content with standard operating hours and did not feel a need to expand their businesses into the online world or explore customer friendly alternatives to in-person shopping like delivery and curbside pick-up. It’s incredible how much can change in a year! Retailers’ fresh look at how business is done, and seamless adaptation is a long term positive in the face of very difficult times.

While providing new forms of service to meet customer needs is vital to long term success, so too is the need to be vigilant against customer disservice, whether deliberate or inadvertent. Customer disservice may be most prevalent where the pricing of goods is grossly out of line with prices of the same or similar goods in the marketplace. The common term for this practice is price gouging and engaging in its practice can result in significant civil penalties and a hit to your reputation. The other day I spoke to a friend and former colleague at the Attorney General’s office and was surprised to learn that price gouging is the number two complaint received by the Consumer Protection Division. Second only to robocalls, which are universally despised. This tells me that consumers have no interest in being taken advantage of and no problem standing up for themselves, as they should.

The legal definition of price gouging is unfortunately non-specific. MCL 445.903(z) defines price gouging as “charging the consumer a price that is grossly in excess of the price at which similar property or services are sold.” To do so constitutes an unfair, un-

conscionable, or deceptive method, act or practice in violation of the Michigan Consumer Protection Act. MCL 445.903. The exact point at which a price crosses the threshold from higher than others to “grossly in excess” is not clear and tends to reside in the “know it when you see it” category, which offers little safety net for retailers. The closest we have come to a hard and fast definition was during the height of the pandemic through Executive Orders 2020-53 and 2020-89 which prohibited sale prices of greater than twenty percent higher than those prices that were in place as of March 9, 2020 unless the increase was a direct result of an increased cost in bringing the product to market. While this provided a clear rule, it was only intended for the short term, with an expiration date of June 12, 2020. As a result, factors such as inflation, market changes, inventory and long term supply and demand did not come into play as substantially as they would with any attempt to establish a permanent rule.

The Consumer Protection Act permits an aggrieved consumer to pursue two courses of action, so retailers should take note.

First, they may file a complaint with the Department of Attorney General – Consumer Protection Division. The Attorney General will receive the complaint and reach out to the alleged offending party to make them aware of the complaint and invite a response. Through this process, the Attorney General’s goal is to mediate a resolution to the satisfaction of both parties. While the Attorney General will not represent individual consumers in price gouging lawsuits, she does have the authority to sue for injunctive relief, preventing the offending party from engaging in the price gouging and costs awarding costs to the prevailing party. There are also potential monetary penalties. A persistent and knowing violation of the Consumer Protection Act can result in a civil penalty of not more than \$25,000.00 (MCL 445.905(1)) and a retailer who knowingly violates the terms of any court order is subject to a \$5,000 civil fine for each violation (MCL 445.905(4)).

Second, the individual may sue the retailer and seek a declaratory judgment. A court may deem the practice unlawful and order injunctive relief requiring the offending party to cease the activity and pay actual damages or \$250.00 (whichever is greater) plus reasonable attorneys’ fees. Perhaps more significant than the legal remedies available, however, is the potential

continued on page 18

Lighter version of normal



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“During the winter and spring cycles of a new legislative term, legislators engage in a myriad of crucial activities...”

We are weeks away from the first 100 days since the start of the new legislative session. While the general public hears a lot about politics during an election season, the real policy discussions happen before and after the election. The tail end of 2020 saw a busy COVID-focused lame duck session and the beginning of 2021 began slowly, as all new sessions do.

In business, the year is divided into quarters. In the legislative world, we think in terms of cycles. During the winter and spring of a new legislative term, legislators are focused on introducing new bills, getting up to speed on their new committee assignments, and hammering out amendments with the goal of getting critical items into the annual state budget. To put things in perspective, during the 2019/2020 session, 3,806 bills were introduced with 15% (580) of them being signed into law. In the first two months of 2021, more than 650 bills have been introduced, with more added daily.

As you can imagine, it's much harder to stay in the loop when most people are operating remotely. The old saying “out of sight, out of mind” rings especially true right now. Traditionally, lobbyists hang out in the lobby area of each legislative chamber – to be seen and build relationships with policymakers. Conversations about MRA's 2021 priorities and discussions on other bills lawmakers are considering have been difficult, especially when you have to schedule times to talk over Zoom or on the phone. There are less conversations happening in legislative hallways, downtown coffee shops or before/after committee meetings. Although more Michiganders are being vaccinated daily and business is starting to hum a little more, we are still operating in a lighter version of normal as we all continue keeping our distance.

UPDATE ON COVID VACCINES

As Michigan continues to expand the availability of vaccines, MRA is working with the state to ensure all Michigan pharmacies are able to assist with vaccinating the population. As we have argued, pharmacies have expertise in this area, (think of the flu shot), established trust with customers, and greater accessibility in hours and locations. Since retail stores remain open to the public, we believe that all retail workers should be eligible to receive the vaccine in one of the earlier phases and will continue to advocate on their behalf.

IT'S 2021 – DO YOU KNOW WHO YOUR LEGISLATORS ARE?

Pop quiz: can you name the state representative(s)

and state senator(s) who represent the area(s) where you do business? Do you know who your congressional representative is and the difference between state lawmakers and federal representatives? Do you understand what they stand for? Do they understand what matters to business owners like you? This is a great time to learn legislative issues that may affect your business and focus on building relationships with your legislators.

While we work hard to nurture relationships at the Capitol every day, Lansing isn't the only place where this work takes place. As a business owner, it is vital for you to establish strong relationships with the elected officials who represent your community.

Educating legislators and community leaders is a critically important step in the legislative process. A lawmaker who knows you and your business and is steeped in the concerns and interests of your community is often extremely helpful when (not if) issues arise in Lansing.

If you are new to engaging lawmakers, consider this as an opportunity! Invite legislators to visit your business. Ask them about their priorities. Share with them the challenges current or proposed regulations have on your business, employees and family. Lawmakers want to hear your business' story in order to better understand the businesses, communities and people they represent.

To find out who your legislators are, go to www.house.mi.gov and www.senate.michigan.gov and click on the link to find your representative/senator. After entering your address, it will give you your legislator's name and contact information. Be sure to check each location you operate a business in as well as your home address. There may be several legislators you'll want to get to know.

Being proactive by getting to know legislators and candidates can prevent a number of headaches for you and your business. Turning your legislator into an advocate ensures that there is always someone asking the important questions when legislation that could impact your livelihood is considered. Building relationships with legislators and community leaders is the best way to protect your business and its continued success from potential government overreach.



Service manager Trish Herrera (left) and sales employee Marilou Bella, discuss an order.

Planning, strategy help family-owned furniture business thrive amid pandemic

By **SHANDRA MARTINEZ**

Photos **STEVE JESSMORE**

The Vermeulens have been in the furniture business for three generations. While there's no question the pandemic has been challenging, the past year has been one of the company's most successful — even with being forced to shut down their stores for two months last spring.

“We are experiencing a big uptick in business,” said Vermeulen

Furniture owner Lynn Vermeulen, explaining that business doubled in January compared to a year earlier. “We’ve had to hire another delivery crew and buy another truck. It’s pretty crazy right now.”

The family business includes a 45,000-square-foot main store in Jackson and two La-Z-Boy galleries in Lansing and Portage.

A PERFECT STORM

The retailer is benefiting from a perfect storm, from the closure of competitor Art Van in their three markets in February to an extended quarantine period that had people spending money sprucing up their homes with new furniture that otherwise might have gone toward vacations.

While other retailers might have pulled back on marketing with rising sales, the Vermeulens maintained the budget. Their marketing strategy is a combination of old-fashioned direct mailers using high-quality paper and color photos along with targeted emails and Facebook videos.

Direct mail campaigns have been the most effective. Their advertising agency, Knorr Marketing in Traverse City, uses technology to target certain demographics and specific areas within ZIP codes.





Clockwise: Owners Lynn Vermeulen and son Nate Vermeulen at Vermeulen's Home Furnishings, Jackson, MI.; details of home accessories and furnishings available; Frank and Evonne McGinty, of Jackson, browse some of the fabric samples; details of home accessories and furnishings.

They know the ads are working because people are walking through their doors daily with the mailings in hand.

"We have a pretty big customer base. Now, with Art Van closings, a lot of customers out there may not be familiar with our store, so we want to get in front of them," said Lynn's son, Nate. "We can target literally by neighborhood."

STRATEGIC STORAGE

In May, the Vermeulens recognized that merchandise was getting difficult to order so they bought more and rented a second warehouse to store it.

"It puts us in a good position to be able to deliver things to people right now, which is helping us a lot," Lynn said, noting the current wait time for a manufacturer to deliver a product is about six months.

Demand has skyrocketed for mattresses and upholstered items, such as stationary sofas, motion sofas and recliners.

To help ensure the safety of customers and staff, the company invested in electrostatic misting, which sprays an antiviral mist that

is very effective against all kinds of viruses, including COVID-19.

With people spending more time online, the Vermeulens are taking advantage of Facebook, where they have about 18,000 followers. They are live-streaming videos that take people through the store, showing off new products and even bringing designers on to discuss trends in colors, fabrics and design. The engagement has been strong, Lynn said.

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT

When most of the state's businesses closed from March 23 to May 26 under the governor's orders to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the experience sped up the company's plans to develop a digital presence.

"I'm in a performance group with 10 other stores around the U.S. and Canada," Lynn said. "The stores that were e-commerce-capable during the closure did a lot of business, where the rest of us didn't do any."

The business is also moving forward with launching an e-com-

continued on page 18

Cancelled! How to survive when your business is a target

MRA Member Karey Robinette offers tips on surviving a social media firestorm

By **JENNIFER ROOK**

Imagine this scenario. You are the owner of a successful business that many consider to be a much-loved institution and a destination. You receive a phone call that a well-known political figure that's equally loved and hated wants to visit your store. Celebrities and lawmakers visit all the time, so you treat this request like any other. You give the "ok" with some stipulations. No grandstanding. No speeches. We have a business to run here.

The visit happens without any glitches. That should be the end of it, right? You start noticing that the stories the local media issued about the visit have some of the facts right, but there's a lot of misinformation too. Then your Facebook page starts to blow up with hundreds of vial comments from nearby residents, customers, and people from everywhere angry as to why you let this person visit your store. Your phone starts ringing too. Call after call from people who vow to boycott your business or worse. *Boycott? Business is hard enough right now without this additional stress.* The thought of the potential fallout from all of this is overwhelming.

This is exactly when Karey Robinette found herself and her beloved family business Robinette's Apple Haus & Winery, based in Grand Rapids, this past fall when a well-known and many would consider to be a polarizing political figure paid a visit to Robinette's to support a local business.

"Sometimes we get a heads up that a celebrity is coming and other times they just show up," said Robinette. "Most of the time, I don't even know who they are until after they've left. To us, they are all customers regardless of how famous they are. We treat everyone the same."

CRISIS. BACKLASH. NOW CANCELLED

The definition of what the Robinettes experienced seems to change every few years. At one time business faced a potential media *crisis* where a majority of the maelstrom would come from news outlets. Social media introduced the concept of instantaneous *backlash*. Not only were businesses taking hits from the media, but now they had to contend with direct consumer feedback thanks to Facebook message boards, Twitter posts, and YouTube videos. As stated in a *Forbes* article earlier this year, with consumers being more informed and empowered than ever before, backlash has risen to a whole new level now known as "cancel culture," where online audiences use the sheer vastness of social media to organize and deliver damaging blows to a business at an alarming rate.

According to Dictionary.com, "cancel culture refers to the popular practice of withdrawing support for public figures and companies



Robinette's came under fire in September 2020 when a polarizing political figure paid a visit to the beloved family business.

after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive." In a 2020 study conducted by Yougov.com, half (51%) of US adults think that canceling someone is an effective way of driving social change. Furthermore, a study by Edelman Public Relations Worldwide revealed that 64% of consumers around the world will buy or boycott a brand solely because of its position on a social or political issue.

So, knowing this, what can a business owner do if they find their business under attack? Robinette offers five suggestions based on what she and her employees learned.

1. HAVE A PROTOCOL IN PLACE

Well established businesses have procedures in place to keep operations running as efficiently as possible. Managing social firestorms should be no different.

"As everything was happening, we reminded ourselves that we are a business first and at our very core, we do not discriminate nor do we turn customers away," said Robinette. "We advised our employees to follow the same protocol that we use for dealing with angry customers."

Robinette advised employees to turn the calls over to a manager, not wanting Robinette's younger employees, in particular, to bear the brunt of someone's anger. Employees acknowledged posts on Facebook and kept a majority of the comments, hiding only those that were truly offensive.

"It's important to keep the protocol as simple as possible," said Robinette. "In the heat of the moment, it's easy to get caught up in determining a Plan A or Plan B but that can get complicated re-

ally fast. We focused our efforts on acknowledging and listening. Overall, we found that people just wanted to be heard.”

2. EXPECT THAT THE FIRST 72 HOURS WILL BE ROUGH

Robinette said that after more than 600+ Facebook comments and more than 250 phone calls, by day three things started to die down and Robinette’s fans started to come to the rescue. By the end of the week, the phone calls and Facebook comments started to peter out.

“Our fans started defending us on Facebook and after a while the fans started to outnumber the detractors,” said Robinette. “We were so touched because those first few days were rough and mentally exhausting.”

The big takeaway the Robinette’s team learned within the first 48 hours is that people looking to complain will complain – and you need to ride out the storm.

“Expect the fire to be hot,” advised Robinette. “If you truly did something wrong, admit it and apologize. Don’t try to hide. Let people be angry. Have faith that the temperature will come down.”

3. THERE’S A GOOD CHANCE THAT THE MEDIA WILL MAKE MISTAKES

In the race to be the first to break a story and to generate a high click count, many news outlets rush out stories to beat the competition, knowing that their version may not be accurate.

“This was very frustrating because we tried to clarify facts but unfortunately, there are reporters out there who have an agenda and want to use you and your business to fit the narrative they are shaping,” said Robinette.

In Robinette’s case, news outlets were reporting that the visiting celebrity also hosted a political rally. The truth was that a nearby farm was hosting a political function that Robinette’s had no involvement in. Robinette tried to clarify this repeatedly during interviews. Unfortunately, a news outlet reported that Robinette’s not only hosted the celebrity but also held a political rally. To make matters worse, other news sources around the Midwest started to mimic that story.

“When this happens, focus on staying consistent with your response,” said Robinette. “When asked, we clarified and kept doing it. Unfortunately, you will have those people who want to believe what they want to believe. Eventually, the truth will surface.”

4. KEEP YOUR SOCIAL CHANNELS ACTIVE

This should be second nature to businesses; however, many still let their social media pages go dormant, chalking it up to other priorities.

“We are very active on Facebook, it’s our virtual community hub,” said Robinette. “So, when everything started to happen, people who wanted to voice their concern could see that we have an established community and interact frequently with customers.”

Robinette believes it was Robinette’s fan base and the high volume of positive customer reviews on Google that helped the situation from getting worse.

“Our fans showed up in droves quickly. We are forever grateful for that,” said Robinette. “Our fans coming to our defense helped to disperse the negativity and gave us the energy we needed to get through the difficulty.”

5. THE DETRACTORS WERE NEVER YOUR CUSTOMERS ANYWAY

As scary as it may be to see comment after comment of people threatening to never patronize your business again, there’s a good chance that these people were never your customers to begin with.

“We were getting calls and comments from all over the country,” said Robinette. “In some cases, we realized that it was obvious that the people commenting weren’t familiar with us or our business. We did not spend a lot of time worrying about it and just focused on treating everyone with respect and dignity because at the end of the day, they are people behind the posts and the phone calls.”

Losing customers is just a part of doing business. In the case of being cancelled, it’s possible you will lose customers for a while.

“If you have a good product and a good reputation, your customers will come back,” said Robinette. “These are the people we want to serve and do right by. The others, well if they decide to give us another chance, we’ll be ready to serve them excellent apple cider and donuts with a smile.”



Loyal customers across the country came to Robinette’s aid and defended the business.

5 Things to Consider when Refreshing Your Digital Campaigns

By **JENNIFER ROOK**

Oscar Wilde once said that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. If only he knew how the word, “impression” would take on a whole new meaning many years later.

These days, the common marketing practice known as the “Rule of 7,” meaning that a potential customer needs to see a message at least 7 times before it leaves an impression and inspires action. Some would argue that number is now roughly 11 times or even double that.

“If you think about all of the digital campaigns, otherwise known as content, running out there following this benchmark, the vast amount of information slamming consumers is overwhelming,” says Katie Saglimbene, president of Lansing-based Elevate Marketing. “Yes, there is a lot of noise and that’s not going to change. But if you focus your efforts and resist the urge to try and reach everyone, you can attract quality customers.”

There are thousands upon thousands of articles published daily about how to find the right combination of content. Humans are fickle, points out Saglimbene. What worked one day may fall flat the next. So, how do you know if what you have out there is working? And if something isn’t, how do you know when to make a change?

Saglimbene offers five tips to keep in mind when evaluating the effectiveness of your digital campaign.

1

KEEP THE TONE OF YOUR CAMPAIGNS CONSISTENT WITH YOUR BRAND VOICE

Saglimbene says this step is often overlooked for the sake of getting an appealing offer in front of a potential customer. However, if your message and brand voice do not align, the message goes stale very quickly.

“Your brand voice must reflect your core values as a business,” said Saglimbene. “Think of your brand as a person, with unique traits, characteristics, and sense of style. If you try to mirror someone else’s brand voice, it won’t sound authentic. This will cause your message to fall flat with potential customers.”

Once you determine your brand voice and align it with your products and services, stay committed. Many businesses believe that they must alter their voice to attract customers, when actually the opposite is true.

“You can’t be everything to everyone, so don’t,” said Saglimbene. “Customers that like your particular brand persona, product offering, and services will be attracted to you. This is what you want because these customers will be the most loyal and your greatest fans.”

2

MAP OUT YOUR CUSTOMER’S PATH TO YOUR BUSINESS

This builds upon the first point. In thinking about your brand voice in the form of a person, Saglimbene advises thinking about how your brand person greets potential customers and how that person presents themselves.

“Envision your brand persona meeting a potential customer seven times during their journey to do business with you,” said Saglimbene.

Campaigns go stale fast. Here are some ideas to keep content fresh



“Map out how this person first says ‘hello.’ Think about what you want to communicate, how you want to say it, and how you want it delivered.”

For example, say you owned XYZ landscape and you identified your brand persona to be to-the-point, easy-going, and female. Your first initial “impression” may be in the form of an article entitled, “Five Easy Plants that Add Color to a Window Box Fast.” You can target young females and do a paid content piece on Facebook with an Instagram story mix. You can also create quick video montages and TikTok stories. You can also target three or four female influencers and run paid content on top gardening blogs/vlogs.

Have a lot of content already? This leads to the next point.

SQUEEZE AS MUCH MILEAGE OUT OF ONE PIECE OF CONTENT

Many businesses believe that they have to turn into original content machines, forever trying to come up with the next big idea just to stand out.

“Yes, originality is always favored, yet sometimes originality comes in the form of repurposing what you’ve already created,” said Saglimbene. “Taking this approach enables you to present your ideas in different ways, drives your message home, and keeps you committed to your brand voice.”

Have a six-page white paper? Think about creating an abstract to go along with it or break it up into six smaller articles that link to the white paper. Create a series of Twitter posts or a brief how-to video.

Saglimbene suggest taking different pieces of content and testing to see what appeals to your audience.

“Nowadays, there is room for experimentation,” said Saglimbene. “You can try out different messages for little to no cost and track what lands with potential customers.”

If you’ve exhausted every angle, refresh the piece, add a new call-to-action and roll it back out.

“Sharing a ‘new and improved’ version of your content will not work against you,” said Saglimbene. “Consumer package goods companies do it all of the time.”

continued on page 18



Saglimbene



Hiring **Summertime** Help?

A photograph of a worker in safety gear, including a yellow helmet and a grey hoodie, using a green and black trimmer in a yard. The worker is standing in tall grass, and a red wooden wagon is visible to the left. In the background, there is a brick house with a grey roof and a window. A yellow sun icon is positioned below the word 'Summertime' in the title.

How to keep younger workers
safe throughout the season

Summertime brings on unique hazards, tips on minimizing seasonal workers' compensation claims

By **JENNIFER ROOK**

Summertime hiring season is upon us! Historically, more than 300,000 Michigan high schoolers and college students pursue summer jobs every year, higher than the national average. To them, it's an opportunity to learn responsibility and make money. To an employer, they are a welcomed resource especially as tourism soars throughout the summer months in Michigan. Yet, hiring summer help comes with its own set of issues, including a greater risk for injury.

National statistics back up this claim. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) injury rates on the job tend to rise during the summer months, particularly in agriculture and road construction. When it comes to younger workers, according to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), employees under the age of 18 on average experience roughly 160,000 work-related injuries and illnesses over the summer months.

This being a first-time job for many, young seasonal workers typically have less experience and training. Some may not understand basic safety procedures that are designed to prevent job injuries. Plus, teens new to the workforce may feel compelled to do every task they're assigned, regardless if they received training or not.

As you prepare to welcome your summertime workforce, here are points to remember that may reduce your workers' compensation claims.

1 Understand the law.

Get familiar with the Michigan Youth Employment Standards Act and notify the parents of your new hires so they understand the legal and safety considerations for teen workers. Available on Michigan.gov, the State provides information on work permits, filing workers' compensation claims,

allowable work hours, and Frequently Asked Questions. If you have specific questions, it is wise to consult a labor attorney.

2 Institute a safety training program.

Start the season off on the right foot. Regardless of the setting, employers should require all new hires to participate in safety training programs. The training should help young employees understand what risks may exist and their right to work in a safe environment, and that you as their employer, makes their safety a top priority.

3 Provide adequate and consistent supervision.

Storms. Heat. And Tourists. As an employer, you understand that these factors vary greatly and impact the day-to-day duties of the workday. But your younger employees may not. It is important for you to assess all potential scenarios and provide a consistent level of supervision of younger employees. Supervisors should be adequately trained to identify potentially hazardous situations to guard against accidents from happening. Supervisors also help to minimize knee-jerk actions that can cause accidents. They can also monitor employees, who may be working outside or in non-air-conditioned spaces, for heat-related illnesses such as heat stress, heat exhaustion, or even worse, heat stroke. They can make sure that younger workers take breaks and not overdo it.

4 Have a safety protocol and makes sure everyone knows it.

What if an employee falls off a ladder? Or slips on the floor? Or gets injured unload-

ing a truck? There is no question that accidents happen. Employees, especially your summertime help, need to understand what to do should a fellow employee get injured while performing their duties. Make sure to post safety procedures, critical phone numbers, and first-aid kits in common areas. Conduct safety drills, especially before large events or gatherings.

Make employees aware of what to do in case of inclement weather. As part of your safety training, provide instructions on how to handle a power outage and where to go if there is a flash flood or tornado. Having a plan in place helps to keep order and minimize additional injuries especially if chaos ensues.

5 Understand how your workers' compensation policy handles temporary workers.

If it's been a while since you've reviewed your policy, it's a good idea to understand what's covered and what's not before the start date of your summertime help. Schedule time to review your policy with your insurance agent to understand if there have been any changes or updates to state laws that may impact how workers' compensation claims are handled for temporary workers. According to Michigan law, all workers are eligible to receive workers' compensation for work-related injuries, including temporary workers. There are stipulations, however. Contact your insurance agent to get a better understanding of your coverage and how claims should be managed. If possible, arrange for your insurance agent to do a quick presentation to your summertime employees so they know how to make a claim and what to expect.



In her own words

Jennifer Stehouwer's childhood passion for nature and the outdoors paved the way for her career in floral design and eventual ownership of Ball Park Floral & Gifts, a century-old business in Grand Rapids.

Ball Park Floral & Gifts

Member since: 2016

Owner: Jennifer Stehouwer

Location: 8 Valley Ave. NW, Grand Rapids

Opened: 1904

Specialty: Sympathy and occasion-based designs, seasonal favorites

MRA services: Bankcard



Story by **RACHEL SCHRAUBEN**

Photos by **STEVE JESSMORE**

Does your business have a unique story?
Contact rschraub@retailers.com.

The corner of Fulton St. W. and Valley Ave. N.W. has been the home of Ball Park Floral & Gifts in Grand Rapids for over a century. Always locally owned and operated, Ball Park Floral & Gifts opened its doors in 1904 creating beautiful and fresh floral designs for weddings, funerals, and everyday occasions.

Current owner, Jennifer Stehouwer, shares how her part-time high school job flourished into a career and passion.

Growing up, my passion for nature...

and the outdoors was cultivated by attending Blandford Environmental Education Program in 6th grade. When I was 16, my parents told me it was time to apply for a job. I was hired by a local flower shop near my house. My first responsibilities were taking out the trash and scrubbing toilets. Then I learned how to run the cash register and how to make a few small bouquets. The more I learned, the more responsibilities they gave me. I was there for three years.

While in college, I worked at another local florist while pursuing a bachelor's degree in business. After graduating, I still didn't know what kind of career to pursue. I ended up staying with the florist for 15 years, taking on responsibilities like managing the design department, weddings and special events, flower purchasing, merchandising and marketing.

Little did I know,

I was working in the field that would turn out to be my passion. My parents have close friends who are funeral directors and owned Ball Park Floral & Gifts. My parents told them that I was looking for the next step in my career. The directors said they'd love the chance to talk with me about buying the business. I jumped at the opportunity.

I took over the business on January 1, 2016. It's such a blessing to carry on this legacy that's been in Grand Rapids for so long. We love hearing stories from clients who say Ball Park Floral & Gifts has been their family's florist for generations. The shop has seen entire lifetimes come and go.

We've been named...

one of the "Top 3 Local Florists in Grand Rapids" for the past three years. I also won the First Place Juried Award at the Grand Rapids Art Museum's Art in Bloom floral design event in 2019 and won first prize in the retail category for energy efficiency in the Michigan Battle of the Buildings in 2019.

We had the biggest reduction in our energy costs and carbon footprint. Being a flower shop, it's really important to me to be a good steward of the earth. We work with a fresh product, so we take every opportunity to reduce energy, source biodegradable or at least reusable or recyclable products, and do what we can to minimize the impact on the environment.

Most people postponed their weddings in 2020 initially,

and once they realized COVID wasn't a short-term situation, a lot of weddings dramatically downsized. Most were happy to have flowers! They offered a reprieve in the midst of the chaos and a moment of relief during a difficult time.

On a positive note, COVID contributed...

to the health of our business. It forced us to understand and manage our cost structure, hours, staffing, and our purchasing to figure out how to better serve our customers who couldn't come into the shop. Our customer base responded by intentionally shopping local, especially over the Christmas season. We had many people say they were only buying gifts from local stores this year. COVID made everyone more aware of how they were spending money and the importance of keeping their dollars local.

It was also amazing to see people come together.

Many people sent their love in the form of flowers to people who just needed to be lifted up. We saw businesses partnering together, featuring each other's products, and giving shout-outs on social media. We carry a lot of local products already, but the increased support highlighted those relationships and how amazing our community is. It was a great result of what would have otherwise been a really dark time. Our team also conquered challenges together that ultimately brought us closer and showed us what we could achieve. In many ways, the challenges we overcame throughout the past year became unexpected blessings.



Top to bottom: Employee Lea Kuklinski builds a succulent planter; employee Kathy DeBruin works on a flower arrangement; showroom of Ball Park Floral & Gifts; owner Jennifer Stehouwer said books have been a good selling item during the pandemic; there is a large selection of artificial plants alongside the real plants.

Planning, strategy

continued from page 9

merce website. But that is easier said than done. Lynn has learned he needs to put an employee in charge of an e-commerce site to quickly respond to questions. Essentially, he needs to treat it like opening another store.

"It's a difficult process to get e-commerce-capable," Lynn said. "We did our website at the same time, so it was a big job. You have to have a good, strong website that's interesting to people. And then you add the e-commerce component."

A BENEFICIAL MOVE

For more than 80 years, the furniture store was located in downtown Jackson. It left in 2014, when there was an opportunity to locate in the home of a former Felpausch grocery store at 2105 W. Michigan Ave. in Summit Township. Not only was the new space about 12,000 square feet larger and all on one level, it was also located in a higher traffic area near Westwood Mall and Walmart. The aging downtown building was getting costly to maintain. And, with nine floors, it wasn't easy for customers to navigate.

In the first year at the new location, the business doubled its volume and increased sales.

"You cannot take locations for granted," said Nate. "We're on one floor with good lighting and tons of parking, which is better for the customer."

LA-Z-BOY LOCATIONS

About 25 years ago, Lynn opened his first La-Z-Boy Gallery in Portage. In the past decade, the business added locations in Grand Rapids and Lansing. Corporate bought back the Grand Rapids location. The 25,000-square-foot Portage location was recently remodeled, and the Lansing store relocated to a new 16,000-square-foot building in 2017. Both are thriving, Nate said.

"The La-Z-Boy locations don't compete with the Jackson store. We're in different markets and we run them independently of each other. They've been successful. Frankly, a lot of people don't even know we own them," Nate said.

"I'm somewhat content with how the store is doing right now, but there are always other markets that we keep our eyes on," he said. "We're getting a bid on expanding the on-site warehouse because, if we continue with this kind of volume, we are going to need more warehouse space."

A FAMILY VENTURE

The pandemic hasn't pushed Lynn, 76, into retirement as it has others, although he admits to not being as energetic as he used to be. He feels good about the businesses' future with both his grown children involved. Nate runs the main store while daughter Maggie oversees the La-Z-Boy galleries.

Nate, 47, began working in the warehouse in high school. After college, he joined full time. He'll mark his 25th year in May. He likes working with his dad, and the company's 25 employees feel like family. Most have been on staff for years, if not decades.

"There's always something different. It keeps you on your toes. It's fun to wear a lot of different hats," Nate said.

Legally Speaking

continued from page 6

damage to business reputation and a negative impact on income.

The overwhelming majority of retailers are well-intentioned honest brokers, but all business owners should be mindful of the prices they are charging relative to their competitors. Business, by its nature, is competitive and retailers can and should command fair prices consistent with their business model and unique circumstances. When setting prices, the best course of action is what any good business owner should already be practicing; keep an eye on your competition and the best interests of your customer and business in mind.

Digital campaigns

continued from page 13

DON'T OVERCOMMIT TO ONE MEDIUM

This harkens back to the first point. This was a common best practice for a long time - committing to one medium like Facebook or Instagram and putting a lot of effort to develop a presence. Many believed that if you build it, they will come.

"You should always evaluate if your audience still values the medium as much as you do," said Saglimbene. "Poll your shoppers. Watch how many open your emails. Track comments on Facebook. If you start tracking, you can start to identify patterns. If you want to try something new, say a podcast, let your customers know."

Saglimbene advises giving new mediums or new campaigns at least three months for a message to take hold. The latest research states that advertisers should give new mediums at least six months.

"Give a new medium a chance to work and determine how you are going to evaluate if it's working or not before you start," said Saglimbene. "Yes, generating sales is the end goal but also determine what else is important, like word-of-mouth promotions or establishing a good dialogue with customers."

CLOSE YOUR FEEDBACK LOOP

This is an important point to drive home because it's tempting for business owners to launch a number of digital promotions hoping to catch as many fish as possible. Saglimbene warns that doing this gets costly fast and may not be an effective strategy in the long term.

"As you plan a campaign always remember to close your feedback loop," said Saglimbene. "This comes in the form of a 'call-to-action.' What do you want the customer to do once they see your message? If you leave it open-ended, chances are that nothing will come of it."

Saglimbene says that not all content needs to end with a "buy now" link. Depending on the medium or the purpose of the content, sometimes this means providing a form fill or a link to more information.

"Determine what you want to accomplish with your content, examine the touch points, and identify the actions you want customers to take at each touch point," said Saglimbene. "Implement one or two digital campaigns and examine what happens along the way. Monitoring a customer's journey from beginning to end will really help you in understanding what modifications you need to make along the way. This is the key to keeping campaigns from going stale."



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The annual scholarship application period closed April 1. Winners of the 26 one-year academic scholarships will be notified in mid-May. If you have any questions regarding your application, contact MRA's Rachel Schrauben at rschrauben@retailers.com or 800.366.3699 ext. 346.

2021 MEMBERSHIP COVID-19 IMPACT SURVEY

Be on the lookout for a 2021 Membership Survey heading to your email inboxes. Retailers across the nation have had an unprecedented year and we want to know how the state of your business is doing. You can also access it online at bit.ly/MRAcovidimpact.

2020 ANNUAL REPORT HEADING TO MAILBOXES

MRA's 2020 Annual Report is on its way to member mailboxes. See how MRA and our membership handled the COVID-19 pandemic and what's to come in 2021.

UPDATED LEGISLATIVE BILL TRACKER

MRA's 2021-2022 Legislative Bill Tracker is online and updated regularly. Learn what bills MRA is actively monitoring and what bills/resolutions have recently been introduced. To view the tracker, go to retailers.com/advocacy and search under "Government Affairs News."

MICHIGAN TRAVEL TV LAUNCHES

This digital resource will be shown 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in the high-traffic lobby areas of the Michigan DOT Welcome Centers and will be visible outside Welcome Center operating hours. Michigan Travel TV is designed to inform, educate and inspire people who are traveling around Michigan. Each Welcome Center broadcast will be customized with information on local weather, traffic, and area destinations. Michigan Travel TV is also available on the web at www.TravelMi.tv so travelers can continue watching in their cars as they hit the road.

Michigan Travel TV has launched in the New Buffalo, Clare and Coldwater Welcome Centers already, with other Welcome Centers slated to go live in the spring of 2021. For more information on advertising opportunities, contact Dan Sippel, of the West Michigan Tourist Association at dan@WMTA.org.

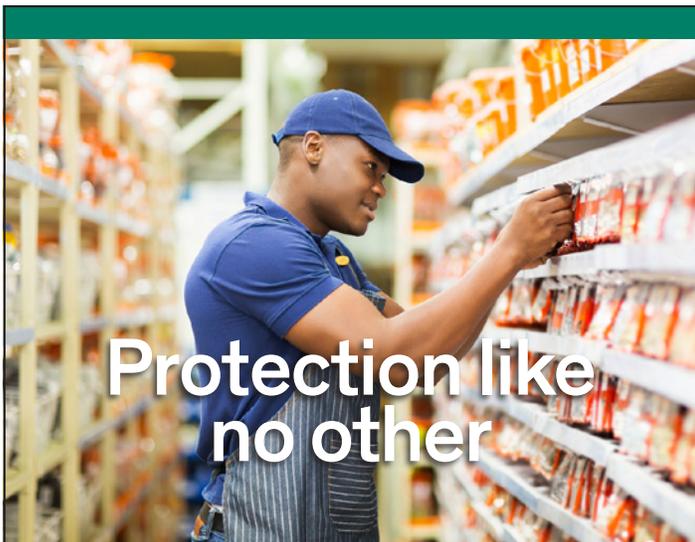
REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP GRANTS TO SUPPORT CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNDERREPRESENTED POPULATIONS

The Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) announced the recipients of grants totaling more than \$6 million to help support the development of over 2,300 Registered Apprenticeship opportunities throughout the state. The State Apprenticeship Expansion grants have been awarded to nine Regional Implementation Consortia to increase and develop registered apprenticeship opportunities for underrepresented populations in high-skill, high-wage, in-demand careers. Funds provided by the grant awards will help support 200 employer sponsors for Registered Apprenticeship Program costs, including on-the-job learning and related technical instruction. Learn more at michigan.gov/leo.

COVID RESOURCES AVAILABLE FROM STATE OF MICHIGAN

Access additional COVID-19 resources for businesses and communities by visiting michiganbusiness.org/covid19. Read more about programs supporting economic recovery for Michigan businesses by visiting michiganbusiness.org/covid19response.

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Buy Nearby News

SAVE THE DATE FOR BUY NEARBY WEEKEND 2021

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Follow us on Facebook (fb.com/BuyNearbyMI), Twitter (@BuyNearbyMI), and Instagram (@mibuynearby) for the latest Buy Nearby news.

HOST BUY NEARBY GUY AT YOUR DOWNTOWN EVENT

Our lovable, shop-local mascot is lining up summer events. If your downtown is planning an event this summer, and you'd like to host Buy Nearby Guy, complete our mascot request form (buynearby.com/mascot-request). Our team will contact you to confirm details when the event date approaches.

BUY NEARBY SUNFLOWER SEEDS

Spring is here and we want to spread the joy. MRA members can request 25 packets of sunflower seeds to hand out to their most loyal customers. The seeds can also be used to spruce up the outside of your store. Email rschrauben@retailers.com with your mailing address and Member ID to request the free sunflower seeds. There is limited supply, so don't delay!

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Oakland Transportation II, Clarkston

Michigan Forensics PLLC, Clinton Township

Zone 1 Logistics LLC, Clinton Township

Cedar Works Inc., Commerce Township

BJ Forrest Trucking Inc., Dryden

Global Hospitalists PLLC, Farmington

Cricket Solutions Inc., Farmington Hills

Four Score Pest Control LLC, Grand Rapids

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Langfeldt Mechanical LLC, Scottville

ASJ Staffing LLC, South Lyon

Spring Arbor Lumber Company, Spring Arbor

Stag Management LLC, Sterling Heights

Pine Crest Wood Flooring LLC, Traverse City

Proper Mound LLC, Warren

3A Inc., Waterford

Specialized Heavy Transport, Wayland

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Amy Drumm, MRA's Vice President of Governmental Affairs, testifies on behalf of Michigan's Retailers.



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