

For These Wineries, Digital Marketing is Serious Business

Digital is the foundation of modern marketing for wineries

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IN THE FALL OF 2021, our consulting firm surveyed 500 wine company websites, along with their corresponding social pages, to better understand the current state of readiness to optimize online wine sales. The findings were then published on our website.

As a follow-up to that original post, we then reached out directly to several of the standout wineries to obtain more in-depth insights and learn more about their best practices. The winery executives we interviewed are setting the standard for the industry when it comes to flexing digital marketing muscles. What we learned during those conversations is shared below.

Digital is the Foundation of Modern Marketing for Wineries

The ongoing pandemic has caused wineries everywhere to bring their digital marketing efforts to the forefront as more traditional sales methods have gone out the window.

But there is a vast chasm between the wineries that exist on the leading edge of digital and those that are falling further and further behind.

“In the current environment, digital is a great way to get your message and your story out to a vast majority of people,” observed Cushing Donelan, director of marketing for Sonoma’s Donelan Family Wines. “It is one of our top expenditures now.”

For Jana Harvey of Scott Harvey Wines in Amador County, “Digital marketing has gained more importance in our marketing strategies every year.”

Mobile Reaching Far Beyond the Tasting Room

To compete in an increasingly competitive landscape, wineries can no longer rely solely on their tasting room, wine club and newsletters to sell all the wine they make. They need to reach far beyond their own walls.

Wineries must be able to take their messaging and experiences to the wine enthusiasts wherever they may be, which is typically on their mobile device.

“For us, it’s not only about having a mobile-friendly website but a mobile FIRST strategy,” according to Jana Harvey of Scott Harvey Wines.

“More customers are reaching us through their phones than ever before,” added Harvey. “During the pandemic, we invested in our digital consumer experiences. We have two apps: one mobile-based through Touchpoint Studio and one web-based, which is dedicated to wine and food pairing—called Pair Anything. We do flash sales for our app users and send push notifications on a weekly basis. It’s another way to keep in touch with our customers.”

Digital Provides the Highest ROI

Perhaps the most significant distinction between wineries that “get it” and those that don’t is recognizing that the ROI of more traditional methods of marketing, i.e., those that require someone’s physical presence, pales in comparison to the infinitely scalable reach of digital.

“If we compare the amount of money we could spend on a tasting event, we get a much higher return using digital with a lot less physical time required,” claimed Eight at the Gate winery owner Jane Richards. “Australia is a big place, and we have not been able to travel within Australia for two years. Add the whole world to that and you have to take digital seriously.”

All Roads Lead to Digital

For a shining example of digital done right, look no further than Markham Vineyards. According to Kim Moore, Markham’s marketing director, “Digital Marketing is foundational to our marketing mix. The entire world is now digital, so pretty much everything we do is optimized for digital execution. Even more traditional elements, like tasting room menus or our in-store point of sale, will now incorporate QR codes to bring consumers from the brick and mortar world to our digital world—where we can educate, entice and capture contact info for remarketing.”

Leading with digital need not be complicated. Donelan summarized his strategy neatly, “Drive people to our website, get them to sign up to our email list, let them know about our wines and build a dialogue with them.”

High Tech Means High Touch

Jane Richards and her team are leaning heavily on tech investments to tell their story and create a human connection globally. “We have gone to considerable expense and effort to add NFC chips to our wine bottles to help us tell our story directly to the consumer,” Richards said.

“Near Field Communication technology acts as a ‘digital wine label’ to connect information from each label directly to a smartphone when tapped. We want to leverage this technology to help distributors disseminate information and experiences to create a human connection and leave the consumer feeling as though they have just shared a glass in their vineyard.”

For Markham, digital marketing is core to building solid consumer awareness and engagement. “This means content is really important to get the right mix of selling versus branding versus engagement,” said Moore.

According to these thought leaders in wine marketing, digital execution brings your brand closer to the consumer. High tech and high touch are not, as it turns out, mutually exclusive.

To Tell Your Story, Nothing Beats Digital

Every winery has a story, but some are better than others at sharing it. It is not just about reaching as many people as possible. It's about doing it in an authentic way that resonates with wine lovers.

Donelan captured this mindset perfectly. "Wine, for us, is the ability to slow down time, create memories, lasting moments and celebratory events that you have with your friends and family. Wine, for our family, is the catalyst for all of this. So, we write about the things we know."

Forget Everything You Think You Know About Email Marketing

The days of sending out a monthly newsletter and expecting sales results are so yesterday's news it hurts. Digital-savvy wine marketers know that fully leveraging email requires a far more personalized approach.

"The key to personalizing each customer's wine experience is to know your customers," said Jana Harvey. "We send out promotional emails each month; but since they are highly segmented, not everyone receives all the emails all the time."

For Moore, record-high open rates demonstrate they are on the right path when it comes to the use of email. "Our philosophy with email marketing is

to put our customers first and make everything feel completely personalized to their liking and interest, with vibrant images and content that offer value," explained Moore.

"We are not just sending emails as a sales tool and pushing them out without a focused message or offer. Each email is outlined in advance with a specific message in mind that also drives our social media efforts."

Not having an e-commerce storefront on their website means Donelan Family Wines must rely solely on their email list. "We try not to bombard our subscribers with emails," said Donelan. "If we don't have anything to say or contribute any added value to our customers, then we don't send the email."

Automation Accelerates Sales

The "welcome email" is the most basic email automation for wineries but is also the most powerful because, according to Moore at Markham, "It offers a seamless way for this potential new customer to learn a little bit more about us and stay in the know with upcoming events and releases."

Without a doubt, one of the most ambitious and inspiring strategies for extending a warm welcome to new customers is Jane Richards' approach. "Every person who places an order on our USA or Australia websites receives a personal video message from us, thanking them for their business," Richards said. "The feedback and open rates on these are huge." Bonjoro is the software Eight at the Gate uses to execute this winning strategy.

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Even some of the most basic automations are worth their weight in gold. “We have automations in place for birthdays, anniversaries, first-time purchasers and repeat customers,” said Harvey. Embedding a special offer into these automations adds extra topspin to sales as well.

There is More to Facebook Ads than Boosting Posts

“We use Facebook and Instagram ads with the purpose of telling the Markham story,” noted Moore. “These ads, or storyboards, are focused on brand awareness and reach, which we have found to be very effective in driving traffic to our website.”

For Donelan, “Targeting the right person is the biggest challenge. Otherwise, you pick up a lot of junk with these ads.” Like many wineries, Donelan brings in outside help to dial in their advertising spend.

Many wineries are beginning to experiment with “lead ads,” which are a special type of ad objective in Facebook’s suite of advertising tools that helps wineries grow their list of email subscribers while at the same time strengthen brand awareness. Both Scott Harvey Wines and Eight at the Gate are planning new lead ad campaigns for 2022.

Not All Customers Have the Same Value, and Your Data Hold the Key

Most of the wineries surveyed use Mailchimp as their primary email marketing software and for good reason. Mailchimp helps wineries keep track of their highly engaged contacts, which are rated based on their open and click-through rates.

Kim Moore explained how they leverage this at Markham. “These 4- and 5-star rated contacts, which have demonstrated their interest in our brand, often get exclusive offers in advance of the other subscribers.” Markham recently utilized this sophisticated segmentation to debut a new “Merlot mystery pack” last October. By providing their most engaged fans with an early and exclusive offer, Markham was able to reward their most in-tune audience.

For most wineries, their wine club members represent their richest and most valuable customer segment. However, even within this cohort, not all members are equal.

“We work with the analytics company, Enolytics. They give us the algorithms to evaluate our wine club members, so we’ll know if any are at risk of leaving us,” explained Harvey.

SEO: The Bird’s Nest on the Ground for Wineries Everywhere

Search engine optimization may be the most overlooked and underutilized aspect of digital marketing by most wineries. After all, what winery in existence does not desire more well-qualified website visitors?

Proper SEO practices are designed to not only generate more Web visitors but improve the appearance and positioning of the pages on your winery’s website so you can convert more visitors to paying customers.

Given the game-changing potential of SEO, it is quite astounding how few wineries are leveraging it. But for those who have committed to these disciplines, the rewards are indisputable.

“Our SEO strategy took form towards the end of 2020 when tasting rooms were closed and our traditional sales methods went out the window,” observed Markham’s Moore. “We saw this time as an opportunity to pivot

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focus to e-commerce, and SEO was an important element of that objective to drive consumers to our site (as our high Domain Authority score proves).”

A winery’s blog can serve to not only delight website visitors with interesting content, but it can also tap into organic search engine results through the practice of targeting specific keywords.

At Markham, “Our blogs serve the dual purpose of engaging and informing customers, as well as increasing our organic traffic to the site which in November and December increased by 33.3 percent, along with the number of sessions by 35 percent and the number of pageviews by nearly 20 percent,” said Moore.

Strengthening Digital Marketing Capabilities is Always a Work in Progress

“There is no magic formula you can put on autopilot,” noted Donelan. “But there are only so many hours in a day, and rather than me personally reaching out to customers and responding to them, we seek to enable systems that can do that.”

“We continue to experiment with our strategy, so it is constantly evolving,” said Moore. “We believe in the test and learn approach.”

For Richards, it is all about continuous self-education. “I spend a LOT of time listening to podcasts and watching educational content from digital marketing experts in order to understand it all and stay on top of it.”

For Harvey at Scott Harvey Wines, “When our in-house people who are dedicated to digital marketing move on, we must continually retrain.” She added, “We have found it easier to keep consistency through the use of an outside agency.”

The Cost of Inaction Will Continue to Escalate

There are many things about the wine business that are beyond our control. But taking the time to learn, practice and improve digital marketing strategies is well within the grasp of even the tiniest winery operation.

Videos, articles, webinars and conferences abound on these topics. Thanks to many world-class wine marketing agencies, help is just an email away.

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