



Instagram

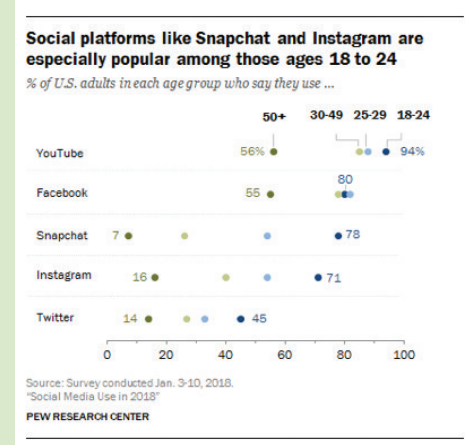


Instagram for Christmas Tree Marketers

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If you read the news, you are probably aware of one oft-discussed villain: Millennials. From napkins and Applebee's, to cereal and big Thanksgiving turkeys, newspapers publish foreboding, splashy headlines such as "Millennials Kill Again: the Latest Victim? American Cheese" (Time Magazine, 2018). With concern for the impending doom of so many industries, where is this younger generation actually spending its disposable income? Moreover, how might growers attract some of those coveted dollars?

In two words: **use Instagram**. The figure below displays data from the Pew Research Center, which highlights the percentage of U.S. adults in each age group who say they use the top five



Having fun at the farm!
These tree carts are great help for moving trees -- oh, and people too! 😄



Liked by **Amy Start** and **2,883 Others**

social media platforms. Compare the spread of the dots for Instagram and Facebook. While 55% of survey participants over 50 years old say they use Facebook regularly, only 16% of participants over 50 can say the same about Instagram. Compare this to the trend for younger generations: 71% of U.S. adults between 18 and 24 years old use Instagram. Perhaps even more importantly, the Pew Research Center reports that Instagram trends toward higher educated, wealthier, urban buyers.

This trend in social media use might be especially powerful for specialty crop producers such as Christmas tree growers. Where buyers used to thumb through the Yellow Pages, most potential consumers start their Christmas tree search on Google. By cultivating an active social media presence, you are creating a more vibrant online presence – raising your webpage within Google’s search rankings. What’s more, research suggests that younger buyers are actively clamoring for “authenticity,” which is great news for You-Pick operations and Christmas tree farms. The growth of the local food movement is evidence of the importance of this trend for agribusiness consumers. Buyers increasingly want to feel a relationship with the products they purchase. By creating an environment that promotes this relationship, and engaging with the consumers who share their positive experience on social media, you are actively developing nostalgic brand evangelists who will do marketing for you.

To be clear, growers are already overloaded, and social media marketing may sound like an additional thankless task.

Despite those concerns, consider the role of perceptions in consumer decision-making. Jayson Lusk and I recently published an article that explored the differences between preferences and perceptions. The most important lesson we learned was that preferences are relatively stable; for example, some people prefer the Fraser fir to the Scotch Pine. Perceptions, however, are much more flexible. By improving how

consumers perceive the authenticity of your operation via social media, you are likely to attract a broader, more excited audience to your farm, leaving them with a more positive perception of your operation – in turn, creating a buzz for next year. The payoff potential is high and relatively low-cost as posts on Instagram can be simultaneously posted on Facebook!

So how does one successfully utilize Instagram to promote their agribusiness? Some approaches are better than others, so I asked Jim Monahan, our Communications Director here in the Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics at Michigan State University. Jim has a long resume of developing strategies for engaging with stakeholder and consumer groups in an impactful manner. For example, Jim has helped market and promote the growth of cold climate grapes in Minnesota and New York. Here are Jim Monahan’s 10 Commandments of Instagram for Christmas Trees:

1. Use your best photos

This may sound like a no-brainer, but bad content can drive people away from your account. Try taking pictures right after sunrise and right before sunset (You know - when millennials are still sleeping or getting home from work), frame your subject in the center of the photo, and it is totally okay to use your smartphone!

2. Create a hashtag

A hashtag makes it easier for more people to see your posts. No need to overthink it, the name of your farm or something simple like “#Christmastreelife” will work.

3. Be active all year round

You want to stay in your customers mind throughout the year. For example, when you are planting new seedlings, take a picture and write a caption like “Future Christmas memories!” Don’t worry, you don’t need to post everyday either, once or twice a week will be fine.

4. Tell your story

If your family has been farming for generations and has a connection to the

community, capture that. You can post historic photos of the farm or create profiles that highlight individual family members and employees.

5. Enlist your millennial kids and grandkids

Maybe even use them to manage your Instagram account for you. They will have fun doing it as they are likely to be experts at it already.

6. Create an “Instagram Trap”

Create a silly cutout of Santa, Reindeer, or a Tree for kids and parents to take their picture in, and be sure to include your name and hashtag on it. You want to make it as easy as possible for customers to share their experience at your farm.

7. Share your values

This gets back to that idea of authenticity. If you are a good steward of the land or if you give back to the community, millennials will be attracted to your business. So if you know how much carbon your trees sequester every year, make a post about it. If your business helps sponsor the local Christmas parade, take a picture and let your audience know.

8. Incentivize Tags

To make sure that your customers tag your farm, encourage them to do it. If they tag your account or use one of your hashtags, maybe they get a free ornament or a cup of hot chocolate.

9. Respond to your customers

On social media, you can engage with your customers before and after they visit your farm. If they tag you in a photo, leave a comment like “It was great having you on the farm this year” or “nothing we love more than seeing our trees find the perfect home”. This kind of engagement helps build that relationship that millennials want and can help turn them into repeat customers.

10. No filters

When Instagram first came on the scene, retro-looking filters were all the rage. As we noted earlier, authenticity is now the name of the game. Beautiful trees speak for themselves. ▲