

Build Your Business with Instagram

BY GRACE HENSLEY



When UK-based gardener Andrew Timothy O'Brien (@andrewtimothyob) started sharing his words about the restorative effect of the natural world on our busy lives, he knew that his tweets could reach a wider audience beyond Twitter. He started sharing his observations on his “Gardens, Weeds & Words” blog and podcast and then to his Instagram account (@andrewtimothyob) to connect a community of new and passionate gardeners. It was clear to him from the beginning that social media is a business tool that is great to build relationships.

Instagram has opened big opportunities for Andrew. Beyond providing local maintenance services, he found his ideal demographic online and now virtually coaches new gardeners from around the world. Andrew's success is a result of steady progress, taking courses such as **The Insta Retreat** (@me_and_orla) and experimenting with this app, which is always changing.

Because of its visual focus, Instagram is an ideal application for our industry. The different ways images are displayed make it seem as if there are three apps in one. The square-formatted Grid is always waiting patiently as new users find you. You can use it to craft a short story about a new-to-you plant or successfully completed projects. The grid becomes a microblog to supplement your website and show curious customers that you are open for business. When you regularly invest the time to write a few captions and hashtags to go with your snapshots, posting in the moment becomes easier. ➔



I love Andrew's steady advice on plant care, his wry humor, and the beautiful, clear images of flowers just “bunged in a vase.” It becomes an easy way to talk about a particular plant, give a shout out to another business, and celebrate the joy of a small moment. A simple hashtag encourages others to join in the fun.

PHOTO CREDIT:
ANDREW TIMOTHY O'BRIEN
@ANDREWTIMOTHYOB



A simple arrangement of Hellebores floating in an ornamental dish brings the garden inside and is easy content to create to inspire your readers. Any activity that encourages participation is a great way to connect with and build community.

PHOTO CREDIT: CINDY FUNES @GARDENREVELRY

SHORT-LIVED CONTENT REMOVES FEAR OF PERFECTION

Instagram Stories is almost an entirely different application because your images and videos disappear after 24 hours. Seattle-area container designer Cindy Funes (@[gardenrevelry](#)) uses Instagram Stories effectively as she shows her behind-the-scenes work of visiting wholesale growers, packing her van, showcasing her fantastic seasonal crew, and, of course, sharing images of the luscious, completed installations. In our busy, hands-on workday, it can be hard to plan a perfectly styled view of our business, but that's the point! Our audiences crave authenticity and want to see the real life of running our business.

Cindy relishes Stories because they allow her to experiment with different ideas and get feedback from followers. "Stories don't weigh me down

quite as much. I don't worry about whether the photos are perfect, or pertinent to the main marketing objective. It's that 'good enough' attitude that helps me remain consistent."

EMBRACE NEW TOOLS BUT MAINTAIN YOUR MESSAGE

The third Instagram app-within-an-app is the short-form video format of Reels, based heavily on the dance-craze success of TikTok. When Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, tweeted on June 30, 2021, that the app would favor videos and shopping over still photos, the internet went nuts with outrage. It can be incredibly intimidating to see success correlated with dancing to music.



Ignore the statistics. "Chasing trends is not a productive use of your time," says green-industry business strategist Leslie Halleck (@[lesliehalleck](#)). Because the algorithms are always changing, you'll waste time scrambling to keep up. Andrew advises us, "You just need to have self-belief and keep on doing your thing. In the end, your followers respond to you consistently showing up and being present for them."

My recommendation to using Reels is to embrace the video format but use it as a tool to tell your business's stories. People still want to know about what you do and how you do it. Talk to the camera, pan across your jobsite, show viewers what you do. I'm a big fan of a 30-second escape; a beautiful garden scene with a bubbling fountain makes me wistful for my own moment of Zen. Could you build that for me? ➡

Look for content ideas throughout your day. "Before" and "During" shots are even more important than the glamorous "After" photos because you can talk about your process, the people doing the work, and the transformation for the client.

PHOTO CREDIT: GRACE HENSLEY @FASHION_PLANTS

>>Click bold text for links

USE CATEGORIES TO ORGANIZE YOUR CONTENT

Instagram is more than a source of entertainment; it's a marketing tool. It provides different ways to talk about your business with current and future customers. If it is intimidating to know what to say, your marketing strategy should cover these top categories:

1 BEHIND THE SCENES

Customers are insanely curious about places to which they don't have access, so show that wholesale grower where you pick up plants or that stone and paver place. You can also show your studio where you brainstorm ideas or your fully loaded work truck ready for the day.

2 ABOUT YOU & YOUR CREW

What motivated you to start your business? Who are your coworkers and why are they amazing (even if it's your dog)? How do you relax after work? By adding personality to your feed, people can connect with you.

3 INSPIRATION

Share the work of others in your stories (or repost to your grid with permission) and build a community that inspires viewers. You provide

value when you share good ideas, demonstrate your own experiments (even if they fail), and help others succeed in tiny ways.

4 TUTORIALS & HOW-TOS

Consider shooting a time-lapse video of a patio installation or post a photo of useful tool that makes an installation easier. Some motivated DIYers will be happy for the tip; others will be in awe of your skills and sign you up.

5 UNEXPECTED BENEFITS

Show how your work transforms your clients' lives by solving an annoying problem or making something beautiful. Share a testimonial from a happy customer. Let your audience imagine their own beautiful spaces, and when they're ready to buy, you'll be the only business that can build it for them.

PEOPLE BUY FROM PEOPLE, NOT FROM CORPORATIONS

The key to social media is engagement. Instagram provides powerful ways to interact with your audience. Cindy doesn't just flip through her feed; she sets aside time to read through posts, give meaningful replies, and ask questions. "I've found that building community has been hugely beneficial to my business and professional development." In Stories, it's easy to comment privately with an emoji or short text to let people know they've been seen and heard. By building her community of homeowners and landscape professionals, she has sparked conversations with people across the nation giving inspiration for new plantings and getting encouragement for growing her business.



Since a garden is naturally photogenic and an endless source of inspiration, Andrew Timothy O'Brien pushes himself to improve his photography and share his daily practice. Adding behind-the-scenes images such as potting up plants shows the person behind the business. Including his hands in the frame reinforces the human connection. PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREW TIMOTHY O'BRIEN @ANDREWTIMOTHYOB

BUILD YOUR FOUNDATION FIRST

If I had told you a few months ago that Instagram (and its parent company, Facebook), could go away in an instant, you wouldn't have believed me. But when Facebook suffered a 5-plus-hour outage on October 4, 2021, many companies lost the ability to directly communicate with their customers.

Ensure you have a solid digital foundation with basic contact information on your own website and then add a comprehensive "About" page with photos of you and your crew. A few before-and-after photos will demonstrate your services but garden-making is a slow process. By layering social media, you'll be showing people your current projects, your thought processes, and what makes your business unique. You'll become real—and the only solution to their problems. 🐾