



Social Media and U-Cut Christmas Tree Operations: Enhancing Indiana's U-Cut Christmas Tree Marketplace

Over the past century, the Christmas tree industry has changed from a large market of real trees to a mixed competition market of both artificial and real Christmas trees. Consumers make the switch based on a variety of motives, including household cleanliness, safety perceptions, environmental attitudes, and convenience. All the while the number of Indiana Christmas tree farms has significantly decreased since 2002, resulting in fewer options for real tree buyers. Furthermore, traditional forms of marketing have evolved in recent decades to include a host of online options that are underpinned by social media apps and opportunities. In a recent survey of Indiana Christmas tree growers, most farmers agreed or strongly agreed that the use of social media has or would improve their operation. This document highlights strategies for using online platforms as marketing centerpieces for Indiana's u-cut Christmas tree farms.

WHY SOCIAL MEDIA?

Today, younger individuals (and families) are those most likely to buy a real Christmas tree. That said, they are also the most likely to use social media. Social media will not only attract new customers, but maintain a relationship to ensure a return of previous ones. While many people point to the age-old word of mouth approach to marketing, recent research among Pennsylvania agritourism operations revealed that internet sites ranked first in assisting participants in their planning, with traditional word of mouth ranking 5th (Carleo, 2011). Though one could make an argument that social media is just the most modern spin on word of mouth marketing. Alternatively, agritourism operators had ranked word of mouth on the top of their list for how people learned about their operation. For on social media, consumers are linked with their personal community(ies), in which "consumers tend to trust their friends and contacts in social media over the ads displayed by business organizations" (Hassan et al., 2014, p. 263). Common social media websites that are popular in the United States are: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. The choice of social media applications most directly depends on the content you wish to post and the consumer groups you are interested in targeting.

COMMON TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook – According to Daniel Nations (2019), "Facebook is a [social networking](#) website where users can post comments, share photographs and post links to news or other interesting content on the web, chat live, and watch short-form video. You can even [order food on Facebook](#) if that's what you want to do. Shared content can be made publicly accessible, or it can be shared only among a select group of friends or family, or with a single person." Why should you use Facebook? As Daniel explains, "Facebook is user-friendly and open to everyone. Even the least technical-minded people can sign up and begin posting on Facebook." He elaborates that Facebook, is "simple to share photos, text messages, videos, status posts and feelings on Facebook. The site is entertaining and a regular daily stop for many users." Given that 2 billion users visit Facebook each month, it is a must for online marketing. You can learn more about Facebook and how to get started with it at:

- <https://www.facebook.com>
- <https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-facebook-3486391>
- <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/facebook-for-small-business/>
- <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2018/07/02/facebook-marketing-for-small-business>
- <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/dos-donts-facebook-business-infographic>



Image 1. Screenshot of Dull's Tree Farm's Facebook wall: <https://www.facebook.com/dullstreefarm/>

Instagram – Similar to Facebook, Instagram is another social networking app that is focused on sharing photos and videos. Your account profile is connected to your uploaded images/videos and a news feed. According to Elise Moreau (2019), “when you post a photo or video on Instagram, it will be displayed on your profile. Other users who follow you will see your posts in their own feed. Likewise, you’ll see posts from other users whom you choose to follow.” Moreau goes on to explain that Instagram is “like a simplified version of Facebook, with an emphasis on mobile use and visual sharing. Just like other social networks, you can interact with other users on Instagram by following them, being followed by them, commenting, liking, tagging and private messaging.” To learn more about Instagram and how to get started, visit: <https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-instagram-3486316>. Other helpful resources include:

- <https://www.instagram.com/?hl=en>
- <https://help.instagram.com/424737657584573>
- <https://readwrite.com/2012/04/18/what-is-the-point-of-instagram/>
- <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/instagram-for-small-business/>

Twitter – With 321,000,000 monthly users, Twitter is a very popular social media platform to communicate in micro messages of 280 characters or less (these are called Tweets). As Paul Gil (2019) notes, “**Tweeting** is posting short messages for anyone who follows you on Twitter, with the hope that your messages are useful and interesting to someone in your audience.” Gil goes on to say that “Some people use Twitter to discover interesting people and companies online, opting to follow their tweets.... Twitter’s big appeal is how scan-friendly it is: You can track hundreds of interesting Twitter users and read their content with a glance. This is ideal for our modern attention-deficit world.” Helpful resources to learn more about Twitter include the following:

- <https://twitter.com/>

- <https://www.lifewire.com/what-exactly-is-twitter-2483331>
- <https://help.twitter.com/en/twitter-guide>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jWNpLvdocU>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenkroge/2013/08/30/31-twitter-tips-how-to-use-twitter-tools-and-twitter-best-practices-for-business/#287bf1662485>

YouTube – Last but not least is YouTube. YouTube is a platform for video sharing. Per day, YouTube gets over 30,000,000 visitors, watching 5,000,000,000 videos, and 432,000 minutes of video uploaded (MerchDope, 2019). Yes, that is all in a day. For Christmas tree farmers, you can capture and upload videos about your operation to share the work happening in the summer and fall, plantings in spring, informational videos on how to properly care for a cut tree, etc. Helpful resources on using YouTube include the following:

- <https://creatoracademy.youtube.com/page/course/bootcamp-foundations>
- <https://www.lifewire.com/how-to-use-youtube-2655498>
- <https://www.lifewire.com/youtube-101-3481847>

WHAT TO USE AND OTHER IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

A fundamental theory often used in marketing, which dates back to 1898, is entitled Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA). The AIDA theory has been tested and tweaked for over a century. In a simplistic

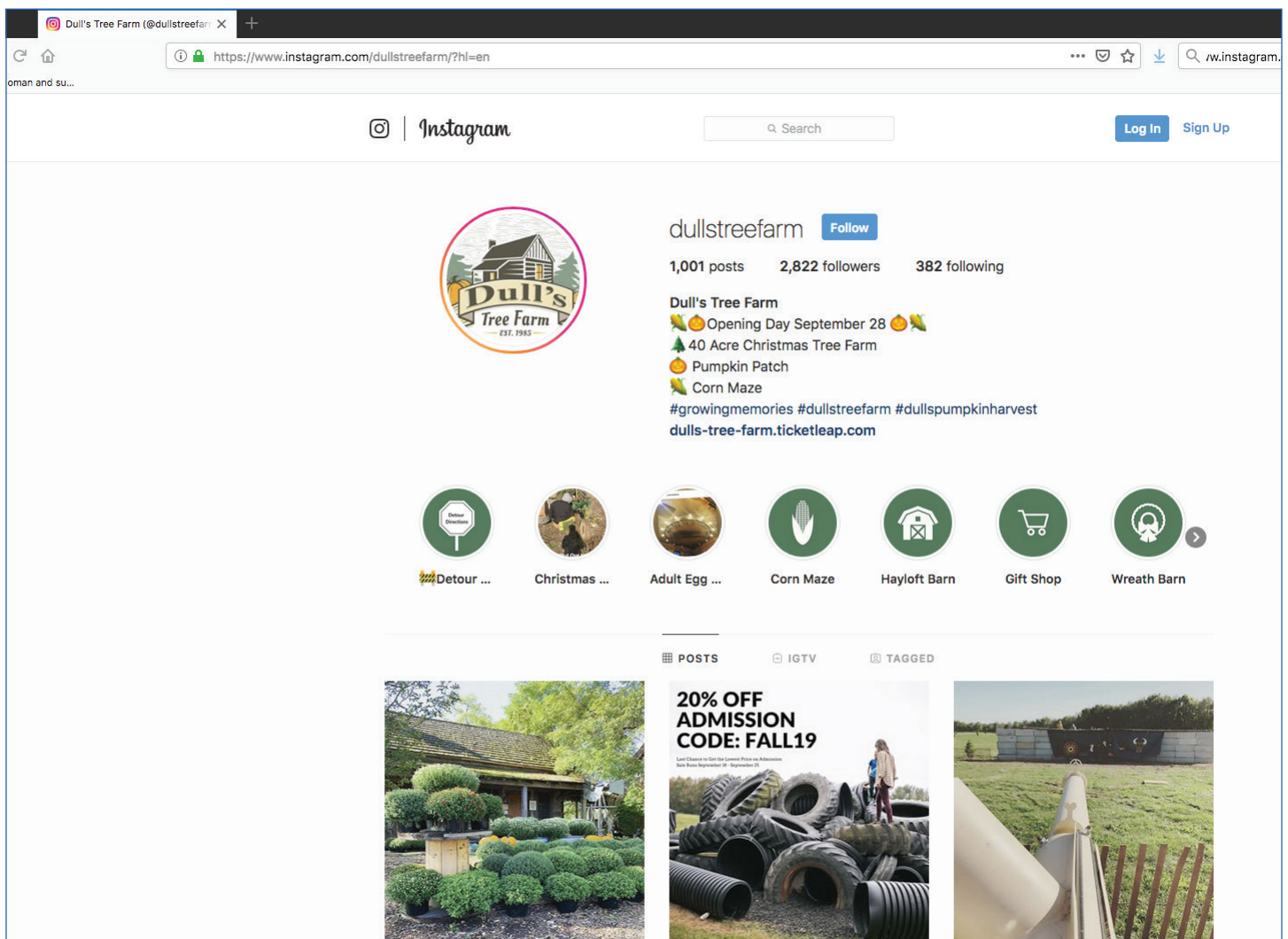


Image 2. Screenshot of Dull's Tree Farm's Instagram Page: <https://www.instagram.com/dullstreefarm/?hl=en>

description, AIDA posits that “users [consumers] still need to be aware of the existence of the product, show interest in the product based on information obtained related to the benefits of the product, and express a desire to have the products because they meet the needs, wants, and their interests, and take action to make the decision to purchase” (Hassan et al., 2014). Many businesses hinge their marketing plan on the four parts that underscore AIDA. While this document is not a how-to guide on developing a marketing plan, having a marketing plan is vital to the success of most businesses.

When it comes to online marketing, a good website is absolutely paramount. Often times in lieu of a website some businesses use Facebook as their online platform. Having your own website that links to social media is the best approach as your entity would be easier to find. Once you have a website the use of social media expands from there. Previously described are four of the most common social media platforms, or apps. All things considered, Facebook should be a top priority for agri-tourism operations. Generally speaking, everything you can do on Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube can mostly be accomplished on Facebook. Given that seven out of every 10 Americans use social media, it is imperative for your business. A recent poll by the Pew Research Center (2018) found that 68 percent of Americans use Facebook, with 35 percent using Instagram, 24 percent Twitter, and 73 percent using YouTube. While YouTube is higher, the site is best for video viewing/posting. In considering AIDA with social media apps, Hassan et al. (2014) outline several strategies that align with the four components of AIDA. Helpful strategies for Christmas tree farmers include the following:

Table 1. AIDA strategies for social media and Christmas trees (adapted from Hassan et al., 2014).

STEPS	STRATEGIES
Attention	Use tagging in social media properly
	Create a “controversy” on your product so that people will talk about it
	Use referrals by existing customers/fans
	Use traditional marketing strategies to complement social media: newspaper stories were noted as important ones by Indiana consumers
	Create cross linkages in all social media and websites to generate visitors. Link your Facebook page to your website, and the other app profiles as well.
Interest	Provide clear information about the products (description, prices, and photos)
	Photos of products should be from different angles
	Provide clear information about the company (who the owner is), name of company, contact phone number, email address, links to all sites (website, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram)
	Provide timely and up-to-date information about products and operation
Desire	Update social media “wall” often and frequently :)
	Provide catchy notes with attractive images on the “wall”
	Monitor comments and feedback from followers- respond quickly- it might not all be positive
	Respond to direct messages quickly
Action	Clear information on hours of operation and how to get to the farm
	Clear information on payment options (cash, check, credit card, etc.)
	Do you offer delivery? Maybe a way to increase non-weekend sales

With any marketing platform there are key behaviors that should or should not be done. According to Jenny Carleo (n.d.), an agricultural agent in Cape May County, New Jersey, and Dr. Ariana Torres (2018), Purdue University faculty member, the following are important tips and considerations to remember:

With any marketing platform there are key behaviors that should or should not be done. According to Jenny Carleo (n.d.), an agricultural agent in Cape May County, New Jersey, and Dr. Ariana Torres (2018), Purdue University faculty member, the following are important tips and considerations to remember:

- Do's
 - o Align your priorities by having social media goals that are focused, quantitative, realistic, worthwhile, and have a target day (Torres, 2018).
 - o Follow/friend/like others (similar businesses, suppliers, customers, etc.) (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Add a profile pic and keep it updated (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Link to other businesses/farmers/organization pages/tweets/websites that fall in line with your operation (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Brand your social media pages with common logos, text, etc. (Torres, 2018)
 - o Offer social media exclusive contests (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Comment and send direct messages (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Search (Google) mentions of your business and learn what people are saying (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Username and description should be clear and concise (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Keep up with your pages, updating them weekly, and providing both text and images (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Follow other, similar businesses and learn from what they do (but make it your own).
 - o Let your followers get to know you and build trust. Videos are a good way.

- Don'ts
 - o Don't spend time outside of your areas of business (i.e. personal details, politics, sports, religion, etc.) (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Don't overdo it- 15-minutes, three times a week should work (Carleo, 2011)
 - o Be sure you check it to monitor the conversations on your pages/walls.
 - o When you get a bad review- don't overreact in an emotional way.
 - o Don't overly self-promote. 80 percent of the updates should be about the industry or related topics – 20 percent about your actual business and what you are selling (Carleo, 2011)

CONCLUSION

If you haven't started on the path of social media, don't fret and don't be overwhelmed. Many small farms and most businesses in the U.S. are not taking full advantage of what social media has to offer. If you get into developing your pages and are overwhelmed, consider hiring a person more familiar to help you. There may be a seasonal helper that could assist you in leading up to the tree-cutting season, maybe a high schooler, grandchild, or former employee willing to help out. While you yourself may not be the savviest in navigating social media, there are plenty of folks out there that are. You can take the lead by being the content expert, providing direction to the individual that is making the online magic happen.

COMMON TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Many of us have varying levels of understanding social media – which has its own lingo and jargon. The terms below are common within the social media landscape.

– a # symbol is used in front of another person name or Twitter handle (defined below) in attempt to to show a deliberate or intentional mentioning of the person and to gain the persons attention. The # symbol is called a hashtag, not a pound symbol.

App – App stands for application, which a software program that is downloaded onto a computer, a smartphone, etc. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are all examples of apps.

Controversy – Controversy in the sense of marketing online is not inherently negative. Rather, it is a flurry of post and conversations. It could be your running a special, supplies are limited, you have special trees, wreaths, etc., or maybe carolers are on the farm between 5-7 p.m. this Saturday.

Handle – Handle is used in reference to one's name on Twitter. It essentially is a username. The Handle is the wording the comes after the @ sign.

Links/Linkages – Links and linkages are generally underlined or colored text (different from the rest) that when you click on it with your cursor it will take you to a new website/page.

News Feed – Newsfeeds are list of updates on one's page/wall, say on Facebook for example. Newsfeeds will provide updates with those individuals or organizations you are connected with.

Tags/Tagging – “Tags allow social media users to engage an individual, business or any entity with a social profile when they mention them in a post or comment. ... The Twitter equivalents of tagging other users is by inserting a relevant hashtag or tweeting at them, depending on the objective.” (<https://www.bigcommerce.com/ecommerce-answers/what-is-a-tag/>)

Wall – “A social media wall is a live or aggregated (and usually filtered) feed of social posts from sites like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook that are displayed on any digital signage display. Posts using specific hashtags or handles are funneled to the display, which rotates in new content automatically.” (<https://blog.enplug.com/what-is-a-social-media-wall>)

CONTACT INFORMATION

James R. Farmer, Ph.D.

O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs

812-856-0969

jafarmer@indiana.edu

<https://sfss.indiana.edu/projects/indiana/christmastree/index.html>

REFERENCES

- Carleo, J. (2011). Taking advantage of social media. Retrieved on July 1, 2019 from: http://anniesproject.rutgers.edu/ap_fall2011pres_wk3/apwk4_social_media_jcarleo.pdf
- Gil, P. (2019). What is Twitter and how does it work? *Lifewire*. Retrieved on July 16, 2019 from: <https://www.lifewire.com/what-exactly-is-twitter-2483331>
- Hassan, S., Nadzim, S.Z.A, and Shiratuddin, N. (2014). Strategic Use of Social Media for Small Business Based on the AIDA Model. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 172, 262-269. Retrieved on July 12, 2019, from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042815004000>
- Moreau, E. (2019). What is Instagram, anyway? *Lifewire*. Retrieved on July 16, 2019 from: <https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-instagram-3486316>
- Nations, Daniel. (2019). What is Facebook? *Lifewire*. Retrieved on July 16, 2019 from: <https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-facebook-3486391>
- MerchDope. (2019). 37-Mindblowing YouTube facts, figures, and statistics – 2019. Retrieved on July 16, 2019 from <https://merchdope.com/youtube-stats/>
- Pew Research Center (2018). Social media use in 2018. Retrived on July 18, 2019 from: <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>
- Torres, A. (2018). 5 Social media best practices that can help you increase sales. *E-Grow Edible Alert*. Retrieved on July 15, 2019 from: https://www.purdue.edu/hla/sites/hortbusiness/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2018/02/3.1.eGRO_UseOfSocialMedia.pdf