



How American Meadows moved its retail catalog business online.
www.americanmeadows.com

Founded in 1981 as The Vermont Wildflower Farm, American Meadows has grown into one of the largest and most respected suppliers of flower seed in North America. American Meadows currently serves virtually all facets of the trade, including large-scale commercial customers, states and other municipalities, stores, garden centers, and individual home gardeners all over North America.

The wildflower seed business was the brainchild of advertising executive Ray Allen, who had worked in ad agencies in New York and established his own agency in Miami. When he and his partners sold their company to BBDO International in 1981, Allen and his wife moved to Vermont and turned their hobby into what eventually became American Meadows.

Located in Williston, Vt., the company's business model has evolved. Originally, seeds were available only to Wildflower Farm visitors. Later, the company built a national catalog business, distributed to more than 1 million people. And today, all of American Meadows' products are only available through the retail store in Vermont and worldwide at www.americanmeadows.com.

Challenge

In moving American Meadows from a catalog to a web-based business, Allen knew he would have to constantly generate traffic to the online storefront. The challenge for a creative retailer is at least threefold: keeping ad copy current and compelling; monitoring site traffic to make adjustments; and determining whether clickthroughs and conversions are effective – and profitable.

Since Allen is an advertising veteran, he has undertaken a variety of online marketing initiatives including search engine ad programs. As a result he has become a quick study in the new and more effective world of search-based advertising.

Results

Allen continues to expand his company's advertising presence on Google and its partner sites. "With Google, I can target advertisements using very specific keywords and drive traffic to American Meadows," says Allen. "I can even reach customers looking for a particular wildflower species. This gives us a targeted advertising solution at a low cost and for a high return."

Besides listing standard terms such as "wildflowers" and "wildflower seeds," for example, he now also lists less obvious, and less costly, terms, to broaden American Meadows' reach and lower his cost per click.

"Since I've worked with Google, I've learned I should always list the terms I see our customers use to find us, like all 70 of the wildflower species we sell. It's amazing how many people actually input terms like 'rudbeckia hirta,' the botanical name for Black-Eyed Susan. Site search logs are a great resource for finding all of the exact terms customers use," he adds.

Today, the American Meadows website does significantly more business than the catalog Allen used to run. American Meadows typically receives more than 2,000 unique visitors a day, with more than 35 percent of them coming through Google. Since running its first Google AdWords campaign early in 2001, the company has increased leads by more than 120 percent a month. According to Allen, "Google AdWords has consistently been my No. 1 search engine referrer since I first started using it, and Google stays well above all others."

As a former advertising executive, Allen knows the value of good customer service. "Google's client service is above and beyond the best in the business. Google always answers my requests quickly and clearly, enabling me to more effectively maximize my advertising programs," said Allen. When American Meadows decided to branch out to a new product line and expand their wildflower seeds business to include flower bulbs, Google client service representatives helped Allen optimize this campaign. The first fall American Meadows offered bulbs was somewhat of a success, but an optimized AdWords campaign helped boost American Meadow's bulb sales by 350 percent the following year.

Another of Allen's favorite aspects of Google AdWords is his ability to easily manage, revise, and test the editorial copy of his advertisements. "I've been a copywriter all my life. In the retail business, rapid response and adjustment to sales trends is a crucial part of merchandising. With Google, I am able to change the text in all my ads in real time. This flexibility is perfect when we are having a sale or special event," says Allen.

In reviewing his company's progress since earlier days, Allen says, "I discovered AdWords early, and as my site evolved, I have used it more and more. Now we're to the point where we planned a whole new launch of a new group of products based on what I can do with AdWords. It's had a substantial impact on my business since 2002 – a consistently positive impact."