

# ENSURING A BETTER RETURN

From landscape design assistance to the utilization of a new customer survey program, Rice's Nursery is taking necessary steps to keep its customers coming back.

by Steve Maddox

No one can say Rice's Nursery doesn't take risks — and that's something, as a manager, I'm very proud of. Many of us in this industry know good ideas can sometimes be hard to come by, and that especially rings true for good profitable ideas.

In just the last few years, we've actively pursued and implemented two programs that have quickly improved and streamlined our commitment to providing better customer service.

## Something To Look At

Three or four years ago, while walking around the CENTS show in Columbus, Ohio, I was on the lookout for a new landscape design program. I came across Earthscapes by Visual Impact Imaging.



**Steve Maddox,**  
Rice's Nursery

I looked at this software as an end to years of our Design/Build team hand-drawing designs for retail customers. This program also served as a beginning to our Snapshot Gardening program — a term we borrowed from Altum's in Zionsville, Ind.

With Snapshot Gardening, we use the program to supply a photo rendering. We have customers bring in a rough measurement of the area they intend to landscape, along with a digital image. It's important they bring in their camera, memory card or flash drive so we can load that image onto our system.

We have two work stations set up to handle these design consultations, which cost \$25, last between 15 and 45 minutes, and typically tackle only one side of the house at a time. We currently have six people on staff with experience in the program.

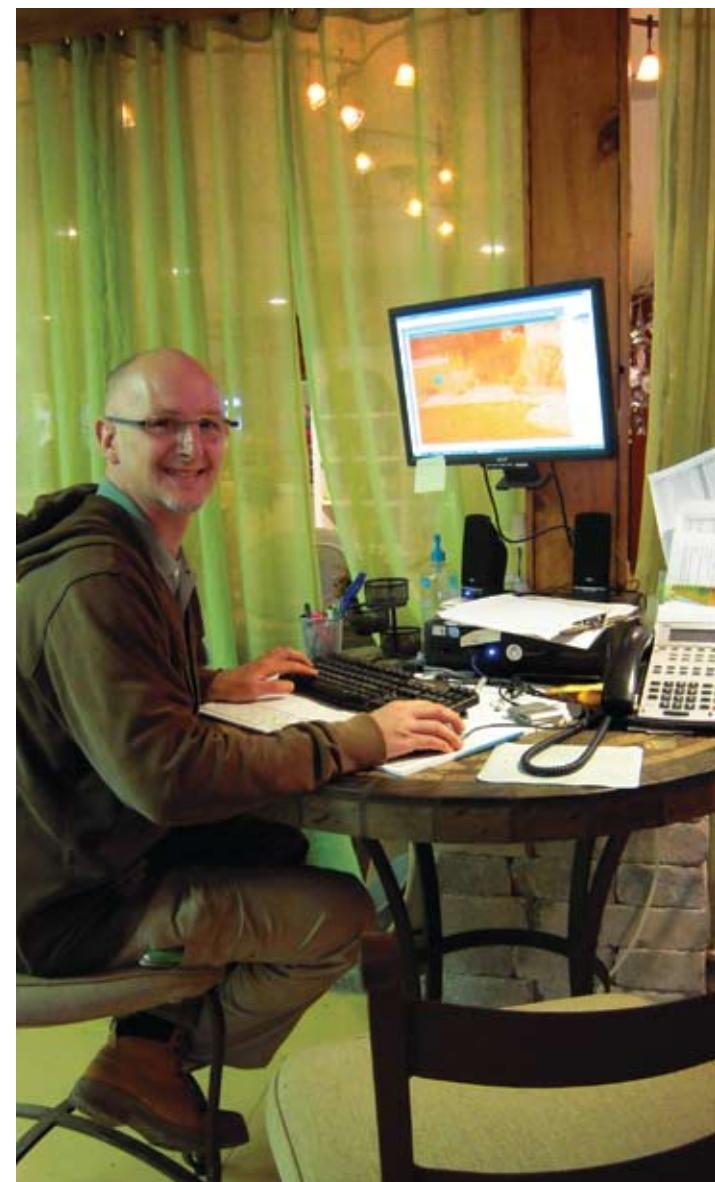
During a typical appointment, a customer will sit with one of our Ohio certified nursery technicians and touch on sun exposure, color preferences and other necessary landscape need-to-knows. Then we begin dragging plants in. The program has a photo-realistic library, so it's easy to drop in a Double Knock Out rose and show the customer what it would look like in their yard, as opposed to us walking around and guessing what it might look like. It's pretty slick.

One of the biggest reasons I'm such a fan of our Snapshot Gardening service is its ability to turn \$25 consultations into big sales.

I'd say at least 90 percent of our customers coming out of a consultation will buy at least one thing for their landscape. But what's even better is we usually average between \$500 and \$1,000 for a sale when we start at our Snapshot Gardening station — great numbers for a \$1,000 investment that paid for itself in two months.

## Pass It On

In addition to our Snapshot Gardening stations,



The Snapshot Gardening stations at Rice's Nursery give customers a chance to sit down with a certified nursery technician and plan out a landscape project. A 30-minute consultation costs \$25, but typical plant sales that start here range between \$500 and \$1,000.

we recently began working with a company called iShopElite.com, which has helped turn our good customer service great.

Through this company, Rice's is able to provide customers with a link to a survey — something they receive on a specially designed card at the end of a transaction.

Then when the customer gets home and goes online to the website found printed on the card, they fill out our quick, five-question survey. Once they fill everything out, they receive a 10-digit code to be written down on the card. The next time they stop in, they can redeem that card for a free plant, which is something we determine ahead of time and have clearly printed on our cards.

The really neat thing about this survey code comes in its last two digits. The last two digits are the actual ranking of that customer's experience during their last purchase at Rice's Nursery.

For example, when that customer comes up to the register and hands in the card and the cashier sees that the last two digits are under seven, they might put on the charm a little bit thicker than normal. This provides our team an opportunity right there to take customer service to the next level.

Leading up to that, if a customer does in fact give us a bad score, the entire Rice's team will know it because we all receive the survey results



**HOW DID WE DO?**  
We know you'd rather be in your yard and garden, so we'll make this snappy. Please share feedback on your most recent visit to Rice's Nursery and we'll graciously use it to keep on growing and getting better. Thank you!

Based on your latest visit, how would you rank your overall experience?  
10 - Exceptional / 0 - Unacceptable  
 0  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

Please explain: \*

What did we do right? \*

What could we do better? \*

Please share the name of the employee(s) who served you. \*

Were they helpful and friendly? \*

Yes  No

Are there products or services we could offer that would make your yard and garden experience better? We'd love to hear! \*

Did you know that when you bring in photos and measurements of challenging areas in your yard, our designers will review your yard, create a rough sketch and recommend a personalized plan? It's called snapshot gardening and for \$25, it's an affordable and personalized way to get started and stay on track in your yard and garden. Would you like someone to contact you to set up a snapshot gardening consultation at your convenience? \*

Yes  No



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At the end of a transaction at Rice's Nursery, customers receive a card (right) for a free plant if they fill out a short survey online. Through this survey site — provided by a company called iShopElite.com — customers score their experience at Rice's and are also able to share this giveaway to friends through a referral screen following the survey (left).

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LOOKING FOR CUSTOMER FEEDBACK THROUGH SURVEYS? AVOID THE YES/NO QUESTION FORMAT. ASK FOR A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF DETAIL IN YOUR QUESTIONS. LEARN SOMETHING FROM YOUR CUSTOMER'S EXPERIENCE — GOOD OR BAD.

## IGC WORKS FOR ME!

*It's taken the hard work and dedication of two generations to take Petitti Garden Centers where it is today. With nine retail stores, 45 acres of greenhouses and 1,500 acres of nursery, our family takes great pride in offering the highest-quality products and shopping experience to our customers. We recognize that our business, like the plants we sell, is a living thing – constantly growing and evolving to stay fresh, current and vibrant. That's why we attend the IGC Show every year to learn about the latest trends, the newest products and the very best practices. The dozens of conference sessions, hundreds of suppliers and thousands of plants and products all in one place is a huge time-saver and essential for our business success.*

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by email. If a score of seven or below ends up in my inbox, I can reach out to that customer and say, "Hey, sorry you had a bad experience. What can we do to resolve it?" And if a particular worker or department gets called out in the survey, nine times out of 10, that employee or department has already resolved the issue before I even say anything to them.

This program has really made everyone on staff stand up and pay attention to each customer stepping into Rice's. It's made our employees very, very accountable for their customer service, which is something to keep in mind for those garden centers creating an in-house survey. Try at all costs to avoid the Yes/No question format. Yes's can be great, but they don't help anybody.

For our survey, we use the help of a copywriter to formulate the questions. We ask for a certain amount of detail in our questions, so we can learn and take something away from each experience. If the service was bad or good, tell us why specifically.

In addition to customer feedback being a top priority, our work with iShopElite.com doesn't end there. Other services we're taking advantage of through this company include collecting email addresses and encouraging customer-to-customer referrals.

Once a customer completes the survey, they're asked if they'd like to share the offer they're entitled to with their friends. If so, they simply enter in the email addresses of those friends, and the iShopElite.com system generates an email notification that looks like it came from us, inviting them to take part in the deal at Rice's Nursery (participants can opt out at any time).

While we're still in the early stages of working with this survey and referral service, I've already seen my staff become more accountable for their actions on the sales floor. As for the referral feature, its potential to collect email addresses and get the word out about Rice's is somewhat limitless, which is pretty exciting to us.

**Steve Maddox** is the garden center manager at Rice's Nursery in Canton, Ohio. You can reach Steve at [smaddox@ricesnursery.com](mailto:smaddox@ricesnursery.com).

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