

Socially Focused

Looking for some one-on-one time with your customers, but unsure of the best way to do it? North Haven Gardens found a way through Facebook and focus groups.

By Leslie Finical Halleck

At North Haven Gardens (NHG), we feel that a big part of our job is to grow gardeners. As an independent garden center striving to keep ahead of the curve, we are always trying to get into the minds of our customers. We want to know why they shop with us, why they buy what they do (and don't), and how we can provide a better shopping experience for them.

It's impossible to speak directly to every single customer, so we often look for ways to have "one-on-one" time with at least a segment of our customer base. We achieve this with direct mailings of surveys, lots of in-house gardening classes with feedback forms and our Facebook page, which allows us to talk back and forth with individual customers. While each of those outlets has distinct benefits, they don't really allow for us to spend focused quality time with target customers.

Getting It Together

Hence, we decided to create focus group meetings for customers at the garden center. First, we had to decide who and how many would be in each group meeting. We chose an age group in order to narrow down our selection process. Our first group was primarily Gen Xers in the 28-40 year-old age bracket. Because this age group contains the largest percentage of new home gardeners, we were keen to find out what was on their minds and identify any emerging trends. We decided that we would hold additional future focus groups in each major age bracket so we could compare results across the generations.



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North Haven Gardens posted a call on its Facebook page that offered a free lunch and shopping certificate in exchange for participation in the focus group. The garden center quickly heard from many customers willing to participate, as well as many customers outside the age bracket. This led North Haven to post a notice letting its older clientele know they would be included in the next focus group.

Because we were on a tight time schedule we decided to solicit our participants directly from our Facebook page. We realized that by going to Facebook we were already narrowing down our customer profile to those that regularly use the Internet, but it seemed an easy way to get a quick group of interested people together. Not to mention, it was a fitting way to recruit a few Gen Xers.

We figured that for a 1-hour session, we could best handle a group of approximately 10-12 people. We posted a status on our Facebook page that offered a free lunch and shopping certificate in exchange for participation in the focus group for the first 10 people that replied to the post. They just had to be within the specified age range. We quickly heard from many customers willing to participate, as well as many customers outside the age bracket that were also interested in attending a session. In fact, we heard from so many customers we had to post a notice letting the Boomers and beyond know that we hadn't forgotten about them and they'd be next!

On-site Honesty

While some may recommend that you hold your focus group off-site so that participants will offer honest feedback, we decided to go ahead and have the session at the garden center. Honestly, as a destination garden center, it's important for us to have customers visit us as often as possible. The focus group itself was a means of getting an extra visit from an existing customer or perhaps a first time visit from a new customer. In fact, we had three people in the session that had never been to the garden center, even though they followed us on Facebook. They were thrilled to finally make it in person and it turned out to be a great way to recruit new customers.

We wanted to respect everyone's time so we held our focus group on a weekday during the lunch hour. We also wanted to make the group feel comfortable so we provided lunch and refreshments for each participant. We chose a local deli and allowed each participant to pre-order what they wanted for lunch and we had it delivered. We started the session with 10 minutes of warm-up time that allowed everyone to get a start on their lunch and exchange some greetings. You definitely want to break that tension at the beginning of the session so that participants feel free to speak up.

It's important to moderate the session closely so that you don't run over unnecessarily. My marketing/advertising manager ran the session; I ran the questions and she kept track of time. We taped our session, took notes, and gave each participant a sheet with the questions on it to fill out, which we collected at the end of the session.

To get the most out of our session and still stay on schedule, we developed an outline of questions to follow during the session. We used the beginning of the session for participants to eat and write down brief answers to the questions. First, we collected customer names and email addresses. Then we asked how long the customer had been shopping with us. We then asked two questions that required the customer to rate themselves on a scale from 1-5. The first rating question was used to identify how much of the customer's gardening budget was spent at NHG and how likely they were to refer us to family and friends. The second rating question asked them to categorize themselves as a beginner or avid gardener and how likely they are to shop based on price. We used these types of question to help us identify whether the customer was loyal and working to help us build our business, or someone



TECH TALK

who rarely shopped with us and only when looking for a bargain. It also helped us build a better picture of customers overall in the same age group.

The following five discussion questions centered around our

customer service and how we've helped them, what expectations we did not meet, products they'd like us to carry, which other garden centers they frequent, what were their biggest gardening successes and failures of the year and how NHG

was a part of them. We allowed for 10 minutes of group discussion for each of these five questions.

Sorting Through the Feedback

Because we wanted honest

answers, positive and negative alike, it was very important that we not express emotional reactions to customer comments. We urged them to be brutally honest and that we were serious about listening to their needs. We ended up with a broad range of people in the class with very different levels of gardening experience and history of shopping with us. The comments we received were not only very interesting, but also affirming.

The session gave us some great insight into some specifics we were doing right. For example, customers growing vegetables were having great success using a new custom soil mix we were recommending. It was also good to hear about their struggles with fruit set on tomatoes and fruit trees. Knowing these struggles helps us train our sales staff better.

We got some great feedback on products customers wanted us to carry that we did not, plus some helpful comments about customer service. We also received helpful information about why they shopped other local garden centers. The most valuable information to come from the session was the opportunity to identify new trends and also get affirmation from these Generation X customers that our focus on urban farming was exactly what they were looking for.

At the end of the session, each participant received a gift certificate to shop in the garden center. Some may recommend that you offer a certificate for a business other than your own to ensure honest answers. But again, we were looking to build customer relationships and the participants were thrilled to receive the chance to shop.

We are planning another focus group this spring with customers in the 40-50 year old age group. We're really looking forward to the great feedback we're sure to get, not to mention the opportunity to compare two different generational profiles. We use all of the information collected to train and focus staff to better meet customer needs, adjust buying decisions and make improvements to the nursery.

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