

LIGHTS, CAMERA, EXPANSION

Barlow's taps into new marketing ideas and off-site options to grow the garden center.

Business is all in the family at Barlow's in Sea Girt, New Jersey, about 60 miles outside of New York City. Second-generation president and general manager Stephen Barlow has first-class ideas for the grower/retailer.

"My parents built a great business," Barlow says about Stephen and Leslie who purchased the company in 1983, "And if I don't work as hard as they did, in different ways, then it's never going to survive."

Barlow says his parents know how to grow great flowers, so it has been his job to focus on the business perspective – the dollars and cents – and how to market the product better.

Caught on Camera

One of Barlow's most talked about, and least expensive, marketing tools is Barlow's TV. Barlow started weekly how-to videos almost a year ago. Each one is short and sweet, most less than two minutes.



Stephen Barlow says that the large signs with photos printed in-house have helped the business sell more products than traditional 8 1/2-by-11-inch signs.



Approximately 20 to 25 percent of sales come from Barlow's Dirty Glove Club members. These customers make up 15 percent of shoppers and have an average sale of \$860. Members pay \$45, which gets them a T-shirt, 15 percent off all non-sales items every time they shop and access to special events such as behind-the-scenes tours, summer barbecues and holiday shopping preview nights.



This new series – Fresh Perspectives – will provide garden center tips from Generations X and Y. Stephen Barlow was a member of GPN's 40 Under 40 Class of 2013 from sister publication Greenhouse Product News.

"We just use an iPhone, and a student who goes to a communications high school edits them, puts music in them, and we pay him about \$10 a video," Barlow says. "They're all done for a lot cheaper than an ad in the newspaper that's for sure."

Bloopers at the end get people to watch the video all the way through and give people a look into life at Barlow's.

"The videos give people a connection to our garden center and a connection to our family," Barlow says. "Customers like to see my mom, my dad or me in the videos."

Retail Expansion

Barlow's built a new, 10,000-square-foot retail

greenhouse in 2004 and has since expanded outdoor selling space as well.

"The garden center is just like a restaurant or any other brand," Barlow says. "If you're not changing, your customers are going to get bored, especially in this day and age when there's so many other choices out there."

Barlow says he is very happy with the new retail greenhouse, but there's one thing he could have done better.

"I wish I had gotten more opinions and visited more garden centers or hired a consultant who knew traffic patterns in retail," he says. "We have some dead spots that if we worked with someone who knew customers in retail, we might have done things a little differently."

To utilize the space on its 6-acre property, Barlow's recently added another 10,000 square feet of outdoor selling space, to create 40,000 square feet.

Barlow's is slowly moving production to a farm about 10 minutes away, which not only increases retail space but also solves one of the biggest problems: the parking lot.

Off-Site Potential

The nearby farm, which will allow Barlow's to grow up to 80 percent of the flowers and plants it sells, is just one way to solve parking lot issues.

"Because our parking lot is confined, and we can only fit so many cars in here, in order to grow our business, we have to sell things off-site," Barlow says, "So we started our landscape business about six years ago, which has really taken off."

Landscaping now makes up 25 percent of Barlow's total business, which includes garden maintenance for customers.

Whether making big changes like adding landscaping and structures, or small merchandising and marketing shifts, Barlow thrives off new ideas building on his parents' foundation.

"For the second generation, your parents work really hard for what they have and you appreciate everything," he says.

"If you're not going to work really hard like your parents did, then you're not going to get what they got." **LGR**