

# #10 requirements for GREAT TREE SALES

Why you already have what it takes and why so much is riding on what you do next.

By Don Eaton

**W**e can no longer “kind of be in business” or “kind of be a source for trees.” The decision to have great tree sales is exactly that — a decision we need to commit to fully. And why trees? With years of experience, observation and ongoing homework, I am convinced that your garden center’s tree department offers the most opportunity for growth and profit. Trees are the future for your customers and for you.

Choosing to become great tree retailers is a decision that must be made today to drive results tomorrow. It requires an awareness and focus on 10 key components. Here’s what they’re all about, why they’re so important and how to follow through.

## #1 Your Sales Team

It is very likely no one is a better salesperson than you. But the challenge begins when our business grows beyond our ability to be on the front line with customers. Who will be your face to customers? If you have someone on your team who is a better salesperson than you, give him or her a raise today and work hard to keep him or her. These people are the rainmakers who drive sales and profits. If you have just one, get two. If you think you need three, find four.

While I believe that all people can become great salespeople, the shortest path to a great sales team is to hire people who have the natural desire

to succeed. These people will tell you, “I got this,” and mean it. They’ll want to succeed for themselves, for you, for the customer. You know who they are.

But the truth is, we all settle for less because of the work it takes to find, train and empower a great sales team.

Consider a comparison between the sales team at a car dealership and your own sales team. I don’t see the salesperson at the dealership changing the oil. But I may see your sales team pulling weeds and watering.

I know my car salesperson works on commission and that the goal is to earn my business over a lifetime, to be the guy to call when I have a need or problem. Imagine what your team could do if they could focus on the sale and establishing this kind of relationship with tree customers. What would that look like? Thank you notes, reminder calls for watering and fertilizing, anticipating other landscape needs and interests. What if your sales team pulled their customer lists to invite them personally to special events or to tell them when products arrived that may be of special interest to them? What if they had the time to do these things as opposed to weeding and watering? What is that costing you?

## #2 Your Marketing Plan

You can have the most amazing sales team

in place, but you have to get the customer to engage with you and act. That’s where the marketing plan comes into play. Plans can be elaborate and complex, but for the sake of discussion, let’s say your tree marketing plan is a five to 10 year plan to become the tree source in your region. Your primary role then is to communicate that you are the right choice, the only choice when it comes to trees. Even, and especially before you’re in front of the customer.

Reach them when they’re on the Web, in email, on Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram and once they’re in the store, with signage. Educate your customers. Engage them with stories about their lives and the ways trees play a starring role. Be consistent with your message about the abundant benefits to the individual, the community and the environment.

Your goal is to be there with this information before, during and after a customer’s need arises. Use every means of communication at your disposal. Running an ad this weekend that sells trees on sale does not support your efforts of becoming the region’s tree source in the coming years. Great tree retailers have a marketing plan that tells the story of trees today and supports their business tomorrow.

## #3 Key Business Indicators (KBIs)

What are important Key Business Indicators



# THE GREEN WHITEPAPER

Visit Eaton Farms' website ([www.eatonfarms.com](http://www.eatonfarms.com)) to get your copy of owner Don Eaton's "Greenpaper" — a complete guide to selling trees effectively.

(KBIs) for your tree sales? The obvious ones are number of trees sold, sizes and varieties. Then filter this information by season, month and week. You need to measure price realized, results of promotions or events, gross margin dollars generated and gross profit within these categories. Go further into the number of trees sold as a percent of number of trees in inventory during any given sales period and trees sold per square foot of display.

Do you know the number of Pink Dogwoods sold in the last 12 months, by month, by profit, by size, by percent of inventory? Imagine if you charted these exact numbers, showing season over season and month over month trends. By using KBIs and a 12-month rolling forecast, we begin to see real results of our collective efforts. This information and rolling forecasts help eliminate seasonality, weather and other events, providing a clear, preemptive view of trends, allowing you to manage for change.

Want to be a great tree retailer in the coming years? It's not the economy, the weather or the price. You can be profitable when you have control. And you gain control when you know the truth.

### #4 Support Services

Planting services are foundational to growing tree sales and can and should be a profit center. Big Boxes haven't tried to offer the service yet, so this is a true differentiator for you. We know from research that hiring a professional (that's you!) to plant means peace of mind that they've minimized their risk of failure and protected their investment. And customers are time starved, so offering planting makes the purchase that much simpler.

Some of the best planting services I have seen add additional value, one in particular offers same-day planting. Of course the service is priced to allow the retailer to provide this convenience and to make a great return. The customer has the same-day option, a seven days or less option and an economy "unscheduled" option where the retailer chooses the date. The combination allows them the flexibility to meet demands and efficiently provide basic planting services.

It's also crucial to offer services like staking, fertilizing, mulching, edging and placement guidance. Post-sale service is equally important to your customer and to you. It is much more cost effective to grow an existing customer base than it is to create a new one. Every marketing plan

should speak first to its current customers with valuable follow-up services; include as part of a planting service handwritten notes and cards, email tips, a newsletter and even an onsite visit the following season. Imagine if one of your team members visited your customer one-on-one and had their undivided attention. And what if they brought along new tree varieties or products to complement what their customer already had? What could you do with this time?

### #5 Inventory

Break free of the Weeping Cherry and Purple Leaf Plum prison you've been sentenced to by years and years of poor industry marketing and poor retailing.

Your customers have watched their parents' plums and cherries fail. They know the pests and problems and they want a better choice. They want a beneficial tree, one that raises property value, enhances the local environment and offers generational benefits. They want White Oaks, Styx, Stewartia ... you get the idea.

The new customer will buy your trees for all the right reasons. Are you positioning yourself as the tree expert and expert in home gardening? Does your inventory match what your customers are looking for? Have you begun to educate them about the best choices well before they're ready to buy?

### #6 Marketing Potential

Have you asked yourself how many trees can be consumed annually within the market you serve? Start by identifying all the venues where trees are sold and distributed, beginning with direct IGC competitors. Keep in mind that the average turn of tree inventory is at best 1½ or 2. An awareness of their inventory helps you put numbers to total tree sales, even by product group (i.e. fruit, flowering, shade). Continue on to evaluate mass merchants and other tree retailers. Eventually you can identify what your approximate market share is and what the total market potential is for you.

While this is not an exact and scientific

Photo credit: Jeremy Hess Photographers, Donovan Roberts Witmer

“Hope is a powerful thing,  
but it’s not a strategy  
for growth.”



Photo credit: Jeremy Hess Photographers, Donovan Roberts Witmer

approach, it serves as a valuable planning tool. And a greater understanding of other retailers in your market can only serve you well. What would it look like if you found out you supplied just 5 percent of your market potential? Before you make any decisions on product lines, have a reasonable understanding of potential sales volume.

### #7 Tree Display

Most garden centers try to display and warehouse at the same time, in the same way. And while this serves you well for many reasons, it doesn’t always serve your customer well.

For new customers, the independent garden center can be confusing, even unpleasant. Most have been exposed to box stores, which means they expect and prefer clean walkways and well-organized displays. They don’t want to get wet or dirty. They expect great signage, information and point-of-purchase display. They want to be comfortable while they shop. It shouldn’t be hard work to find your trees. And it shouldn’t be difficult to imagine this tree in their landscape or how it will impact their yard, neighborhood and even their lives. Help them see how this tree changes things for them (e.g. the view, the energy bill, the backyard family photo, the seasons, the wildlife or even the way their children play).

Once again, I come back to the importance of educating your customer. In most every case, they can be sold on their trees of choice well before they arrive. Imagine the ways this would save you time and money.

### #8 Promotions

We know trees are somewhat seasonal, but they are not as seasonal as other nursery-related products. This is something we can build on.

Early season tree promotions have also made way for successful fall tree promotions. Improve and expand these promotions each year and the expected results are, of course, increased sales volume and customer counts. Add-on services like planting, staking, fertilizing, follow-up and ongoing care only amplify your success.

Our advertising speaks to our customers today. But our products, our staff, our location, facilities, signage and more speak to them every moment and well into the future. It’s all contributing to our reputation and credibility. It’s all contributing to our customer count. Take control of these messages.

### #9 Profitability

Pricing strategy, gross margins and gross margin dollars should all be predetermined well beforehand. While I don’t want to downplay the importance of any of these, what may be most important for trees is to predetermine and measure inventory turns.

Generally, inventory turns are calculated as sales divided by inventory or cost of goods sold divided by average inventory. Inventory turns drive cash flow and cash flow is the lifeblood of business.

For trees, the proper measurement of turns is made seasonally in spring and fall — two separate seasons and then some measurement of the year in total. I encourage you to measure your tree turns separate from your overall inventory turns. Don’t settle for poor turns thinking it’s a necessary evil of this product category. Nothing could be further from the truth.

### #10 Customers

Good customer retention breeds good word of mouth, and can you think of a better, more authentic way to communicate your message? Tree customers usually have homes, perhaps other properties, and

these customers live in neighborhoods, are involved in the community and talk to their neighbors and friends. Perhaps we shouldn’t only measure average sale per visit but average sale per customer, per year, two years, five years and for a lifetime. What if we focused on one customer and applied what we learn to all customers?

Too often we think at the macro level, of ways to drive up new customer count and so on. And how many new customers do you need to create each year to replace the ones you’ve lost? The fact remains, we make sales one customer at a time.

I have written before about Net Promoter Score (NPS), a simple measurement of your customer’s willingness to recommend your business to his or her friends. Some business professionals believe this is the only thing you need to measure and all efforts should be in support of your NPS. What if we empowered each customer to be the most important part of our marketing efforts by making it likely he will recommend your business to friends and family?

Great tree sales are possible one customer at a time. And each sale holds the potential for positive word of mouth and loyal customers who look to you for their next trees. This is about doing the necessary work ahead of time to create customers for life. **LGR**



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