

Is an Onsite Workshop for You?

Learn how this not-so-big garden center got a free consulting session by hosting a simple workshop at its store.

By Judy Sharpton

The story of Bemis Farms Nursery is the story of an industry. Although the garden center is unique in its philosophy, presentation, products and personality, it is representative of the more than 17,000 independent garden centers in the United States that serve small to medium markets. And no matter what Ed and Tina Bemis do to enhance the shopping experience for their customers, the store will remain in Spencer, Mass. The statistics tell the story: stable population of about 12,000, median resident age 37 (that's young for our industry's client base), median household

income \$46,500, median house value \$137,000. To further limit the potential, less than 20 percent of the population holds a college degree, and the average drive time to work is 27-plus minutes. The most permits issued for single-family dwellings was 62 in 1966; since then the number hovers between 25 and 45 annually. No housing boom here. There's also almost no crime.

Spencer is a medium-income, bedroom community. And, although many growers turned garden centers are riding a wave, which is sometimes difficult, of urban sprawl, others continue to provide essential products and employment in

communities just like Spencer. It's a familiar scenario in much of my travels from Massachusetts to Wisconsin to Oklahoma.

A Familiar History

Ed and Tina Bemis are the third generation at Bemis Farm. The farm started in 1917 (some garden centers trace their lineage even further back than that) when Ed's grandfather started a dairy business on a 300-acre farm and planted an apple orchard. In 1947, Ed's father started a nursery on the same farm. In 1985, Ed Bemis returned from Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., with a spanking new degree in floriculture and ornamental horticulture and a wife-to-be with the same credentials. In the mid-1990s, the "young whipper snappers" took over the nursery.

From 1985 through the mid-1990s, Ed and Tina built the business at a steady annual pace. Still, they could not sustain themselves or a family on the nursery's production. It was then that Ed and Tina, classic first-adopters (see sidebar on page 20 for more details), entered into a land-conservation program sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture. In exchange for placing their land in a conservation trust, Ed and Tina enjoyed a \$40,000 development stipend and assistance from a business consultant. Within four years, the farm was enjoying annual double-digit sales increases.

New Adventures

Ed and Tina are active in their state trade association, and I met them at the New England Greenhouse Conference in 2003. There was perhaps my first awareness of the business savvy, not-so-big garden center, which has since become my core business. Neither they nor I could justify the cost of a private consultant for them.

Tina came up with a unique plan to secure retail development services for their own business and several other garden centers nearby but outside their trading area: They proposed a joint venture with University of Massachusetts Extension (UMass) to host a 2-day retail workshop using their store as a lab school. Participants would come to the workshop with a collection of information about their stores, including site plans drawn to scale, sales figures, photos of their stores, sales objectives and a vision statement for the next five years. The morning would be spent



Left and top right: The exterior sales area is easy to navigate with a wide entry path that circles the entire exterior sales area. The A-Frame design element is borrowed history from the original greenhouse entrance. The shape is also part of the new logo design introduced at the same time as the renovation. **Bottom right:** The impatiens sale is the early season draw, enticing customers into the store before they shop with competitors. The bottom of the 2-tiered cart tells the story: 4- and 6-inch material at full price to push the average sale. (Photos courtesy of Judy Sharpton)

in a group workshop on the basics of store development; the afternoon would focus on one of 11 store issues, with everyone breaking up into problem-solving groups. On the day before the workshop, Ed, Tina and I spent the day at their garden center evaluating those same 11 issues.

Guess what? All retail garden centers with similar backgrounds have many of the same problems: difficult vehicular entries, multiple pedestrian entries, no interior customer flow patterns, dilapidated structures, rutted walkways, poor drainage, weeds, inadequate restrooms, product displayed on the ground, antiquated cash registers and inadequate parking.

About the only positive in some stores is the quality of the product. Beautiful plants make up for everything; at least that's what we continue to tell ourselves. The problem is that many competitors, among them the mass merchandisers, have figured out how to have great plants displayed on tables, concrete walking surfaces and easy checkouts. And, time-starved consumers have responded to those updated shopping conditions at least as much as price.

Even without the pressure of the mass merchandisers, who had not yet invaded Spencer, Ed and Tina believed a more shoppable store couldn't hurt their chances for success.

The Workshop

I was excited to be conducting a workshop outside the confines of a 2-dimensional Power Point in a convention center cave. UMass did the promotion, and we started the workshop on a clear blue New England morning with the 15-store maximum participants we had set as the limit. The morning went just as planned: Two of the participants came ready for change and worked hard to find the right decisions; two of the participants sat wondering why they were there. The remaining 11 participants were a mixture of enthusiasm and skepticism.

The afternoon saw the participants grouped around several selected areas of store improvement: entrances, customer flow patterns, cash wraps, etc. About an hour into the afternoon, one garden center owner announced that he and his staff had decided on an immediate entrance change and would be leaving early in order to arrange for a carpenter to work on the construction the next day. The two skeptical stores seemed to be relieved to be done with the whole thing. The remaining stores set a single-store development goal based on their afternoon's work, wrote a brief plan for me and departed.

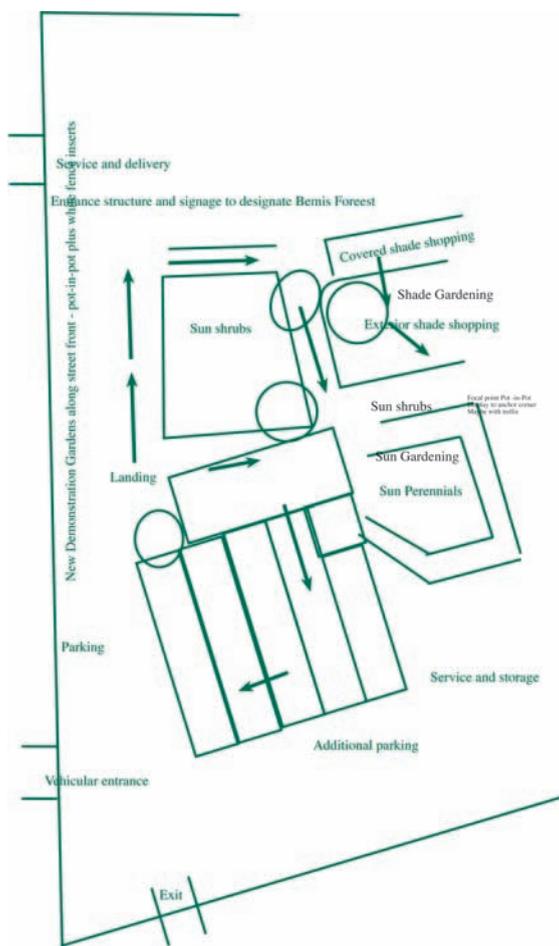
I left Ed and Tina with the promise of recommendations within 30 days, just as I do for any individual customer. Based on my time in the store I identified the following areas for immediate attention: vehicular entrance, pedestrian entrance and customer flow pattern to direct the customer through the entire store. An improved restroom and additional covered shopping made the list of long-term plans.

With any store plan, implementation is the key. I know that sounds ridiculous, but you would not believe how often even paying customers fail to carry out recommendations requiring nothing more than sweat equity. Cleaning the store of debris and clutter can be a necessary and inexpensive first step. Even showing a successful renovation that reinforces a particular plan doesn't always lead to action.

I did mention, however, that Ed and Tina are classic first-adopters. They set about creating a more prominent pedestrian entry, clearing the exterior sales area of "obstructions" and rearranging parking to direct customers into a single entrance. They had adequate structures for the current plan, a workable cash register system and a

The six habits of garden center first-adopters:

- 1) They attend or create new industry events. Ed and Tina reported a great experience at the first-ever Eastern Performance Trials held September 19-23, 2005. They didn't wait to hear how another garden center or the trade media liked the new venue. They also didn't wait until they could afford a private consultant; they created an affordable group program that benefited them.
- 2) They attend industry events outside of their state. I am amazed how many garden center owners and managers don't know about ANLA's Management Clinic, OFA Short Course or Glee.
- 3) They don't just visit garden centers to look at the plants they carry and how much they cost; they study each store with their own store plan and idea note pad in hand. Get a three-ring binder and a digital camera; use these tools to track your renovation ideas and implementation.
- 4) They know and use their local demographics. They get information from the local Chamber or Small Business Development Center or through an industry source like nQuery. Look for information on household income, number and value of single-family homes, education and even spending habits. Then use that information for product mix and customer communications.
- 5) They know their industry and customer. They read not only the industry trade publications but also magazines that appeal to the daily home design needs of their customers.
- 6) They take advantage of special development or learning programs from state agencies. Ed and Tina have worked hard to have access to grant money they can use to enhance their business.



The Growing Places GreenPrint is the starting point for a planned renovation — often over a period of time. Each store improvement then becomes a grand opening.



Left: Another cart full of product. **Right:** After the renovation, customers can move themselves and their carts through the interior of the greenhouse. Note the use of horizontal space near the cash wrap for information and impulse items. The hanging pot grabber is still needed to assist customers with overhead hanging pots; a horizontal hanging pot wall that is more customer accessible will be added in the next phase of the renovation.

solid database. They upgraded the streetside planting to become a streetside signage and worked to bring staff along with the new plans.

Three Small Words

I mentioned the store operates with a unique philosophy. Ed and Tina already had a great positioning statement — “Successful gardening ...guaranteed!” And those three words tell the whole story. The little garden center in Spencer guarantees all its plants. That’s right — annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees. If a customer isn’t satisfied Ed and Tina replace the plant. They provide a readable and concise planting guide that pokes fun at misinformation and reassures the customer of the validity of the guarantee. The guarantee hasn’t put them out of business, and it serves as a unique selling position. It also tells the customer that Ed and Tina aren’t mad at them for killing a plant.

As part of that initial renovation, I suggested Ed and Tina update their 20-year-old logo. When we decided to use a unique A-frame structure as the entrance design to mimic an original structure in the nursery, they also incorporated that shape into the new logo. In fact, it is the logo that Ed points to as one of the most important innovations of the whole process. He believes the new logo communicated to staff and customers the changes in the store.

A Success Story

Since 2003, Bemis Farms has continued to enjoy more than 15-percent annual sales increases. Tina offers seminar series year-round that focus on all aspects of garden décor from unusual containers to natural decorations for holidays. At this year’s pre-spring impatiens sale, Ed and Tina finally had the store stocked with enough of the sale impatiens to allow customers to buy in leisure, assured they would get all the varieties and colors they wanted plus enough full-price merchandise to create an average sale.

This year, Ed and Tina redesigned the exterior front shopping area for an upscale look, replacing a yard full of green with tables full of color. Both staff and customers are rejuvenated by the change. And, the original plan to utilize a separate entrance/exit configuration that conducts all customers thorough the entire length of the greenhouse on the way to the cash register is working well. Maintaining a store-penetrating aisle at 6-8 feet wide is the daily goal.

Most of the store is still on gravel. Many shrubs and trees still sit on the ground. Staff problems persist; as part of this interview, Tina lamented one area of the store that “isn’t what it should be” because of a sudden staff shortage (i.e., somebody quit). Space is still tight, and products still have to be dusted. But the new entrance/exit configuration allows the main aisle to direct traffic through the entire store. Workshops give customers a reason to visit the store in all selling seasons. Most importantly, the store is stocked, staffed and clean in all selling seasons. That is what makes any store sell.

All of the innovations Ed and Tina have accomplished have been work. The not-so-big garden center also has a not-so-big staff. But most garden centers and their staffs work hard. At Bemis Farms, the work is directed toward increasing customer merchandise contact in order to get the store to work as hard as the owners and the employees. Until every garden

center in the United States can select its own demographics, the first-adopter methods of owners like Ed and Tina Bemis serve as a model for the other 16,999 who must thrive right where they are. 🌿

Judy Sharpton is owner of Growing Places Marketing, Atlanta, Ga., which specializes in garden center renovation to create a retail-ready environment. She can be reached by phone at (770) 815-1052 or E-mail at judy@growingplaces.com.

Author’s Note: Growing Places has relocated its office to 1939 Variations Dr., Ste. A, Atlanta, GA 30329. Phone: (770) 815-1052 and Fax: (770) 234-5842.

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