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THE *Vines*

INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND THE POTTING BENCH

# Sustainability Sells

By Ana Olvera

Our world seems a lot greener these days, and not just in terms of landscapes and products your garden center offers. Terms like sustainability and energy efficiency are making their way into conversations more frequently.

TreeHouse, a home improvement store based in Austin, Texas, is making these terms staples for homeowners. The eco-friendly-focused store stocks its shelves with a highly curated product selection, says Kane Sutphin, TreeHouse's marketing director.

Products are filtered through a rating system based on performance (will the product last?), sustainability (is it good for the environment?), corporate responsibility (how was it produced?) and health (is it healthy to bring into your home?).

"If it's on our shelf you can be assured we did our homework on these products," Sutphin says. "We don't put anything on our shelves that we wouldn't put into our homes."

As examples of their eco-friendly approach, TreeHouse only carries non-toxic paints and LED light bulbs, Sutphin says.

"The paint is virtually the same price as stores like Lowe's or Home Depot, and performs just as well or better," he says.

The retailer also focuses on introducing new green products to market, like Tesla's Powerwall home battery or the Haiku smart ceiling fan. TreeHouse is the No. 1 independent retailer of Nest smart home products, Sutphin says.

TreeHouse has evolved into a hybrid of traditional retail, combined with a solutions and services aspect to complete larger projects.

## Reaching Out

"Originally we were kind of geared toward the [home] professional, but since it opened it's more for the consumer and homeowners," Sutphin says.

When the store first opened, Sutphin says some consumers might not have been familiar with sustainable building or thought the store was geared toward a specific shopper.

"Words like green and green building kind of come with a lot of stipulations," Sutphin says.

As sustainability becomes an increasing topic of importance, TreeHouse has seen an increase in demand.

"We've also noticed a growing need for these kinds of things," Sutphin says. "The price has come down quite a bit on these products and now they're more affordable and a little more approachable."

TreeHouse has been called the Home Depot for hipsters. With accounts on major social media sites like Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook, it makes sense why younger consumers would take an interest in the eco-friendly store.

The store's Instagram (@treehouseaustin) account is free flowing and organic, Sutphin says.

"It can be anything, maybe promotions or us resetting the store," Sutphin says.

TreeHouse's account on Houzz, a platform that connects homeowners with home professionals, highlights the store's project services, like remodels or its solar program.

But Sutphin says TreeHouse doesn't cater to just one specific group.

"Our store is built for homeowners, whoever that is," he says. "We're there for the homeowner and people that are interested

in learning about healthier, more sustainable building practices."

TreeHouse is focused on its consumers just as much as it is on its products. "We don't just help build smarter homes. We help build smarter homeowners," reads the Education page on the TreeHouse website.

Products listed on the TreeHouse website feature product information varying from how it was made, how eco-friendly it is and recommendations on how to best use or install the product for sustainability.

"Education is at the core of what we do," Sutphin says. "We don't really have sales people; we have consultants. We want you to come into the store and spend meaningful time with our consultants to help you build a smarter home."

The store hosts workshops and events to continue the education process, featuring classes like a Master Gardener series, DIYs and "Basics" on chicken keeping, beekeeping and more. The TreeHouse blog frequently shares ideas on how to make your home more sustainable inside and out, as well as highlights trends and new products.

"We continue to grow, and that's because more people are more aware of what we're doing and find it more approachable — and affordable for that matter," Sutphin says.

TreeHouse will open a second location in Dallas, Texas, slated for a grand opening in the first quarter of 2017.

"It'll be like TreeHouse 2.0 — more focused on the customer experience," Sutphin says. "Those four categories [performance, sustainability, corporate responsibility and health] will be very defined inside this next store. Our whole message is to be up-forward, transparent and honest." **LGR**

