

Problem or Opportunity?

Is it a problem or is it an opportunity? Your perspective will often determine your response and decision to the challenge.



By Stan Pohmer

There are only a few ways to increase your sales:

1. Increase your customer count by adding new customers, attempting to steal them away from your competitors or appealing to non-gardeners to participate in what you offer.
2. Increase the frequency of shop of your existing customers.
3. Increase the market basket value of your existing customers.
4. Raise retails.

Most retailers would look at these options and decide that adding new customers would be the best way to increase sales. But this requires convincing customers who have some sense of loyalty to a competing retailer to jump ship to you, meaning that you have to carve out a more convincing competitive value proposition AND then communicate this message to them through marketing and advertising — things that are both expensive and difficult to accomplish in a highly seasonal business like yours.

Looking for Opportunities

I'd suggest that you look at your existing customers as your first opportunity — your low hanging fruit. The reality

is that your average customer is shopping your garden center maybe 1.5 times in the spring and one time in the fall or Christmas. Your really good customers — your most valuable, the 20% who account for 75% of your sales — shop your garden center around three times in the spring, once in the fall, and once for Christmas. And most of your customers only visit once a year.

Looking at this from a 40,000-foot perspective, this can be viewed as a potential disaster, especially when we factor in the impact of the vagaries of weather on customer demand because we have a relatively low frequency of shop and short selling seasons. The optimists among us look at these facts and suggest that the low frequency of shop as a major opportunity; what would your sales look like if you could increase the frequency of shop for your existing customers? And if you were able to both increase their frequency of shop AND increase their market basket/transaction value, you'd benefit from the proverbial double whammy!

You know that your existing customers are already gardening or landscaping and, if you've provided them with a positive experience in the past, will have some semblance of loyalty to you and are already top of mind when they're in the market for gardening product. And, since they're already coming to you, you have an opportunity to market to them when they're in your store shopping. And I hope you have their contact information in your database so you can direct/target market to them, even during the off-season to keep you top of mind. You've already planted the seed, now you need to make it grow! It's time to get creative!

Look to the Competition

One of your erstwhile competitors, The Home Depot, has already found a way to populate its stores, enticing a portion of their customer base to visit 12 times a year, and it's a customer you share with them ... kids with parents and grandparents! The beauty of focusing a program on kids is that they can't drive themselves, so an adult must accompany them. And once in the store for this program, there's always an opportunity for Dad and Granddad to walk the store and shop while waiting for the project they just painted to dry to take it home.

How It Works

On the second Saturday of every month, The Home Depot invites kids (generally under the age of 12) to a workshop that runs from 9 to 11 a.m. (the project may only take a half hour to complete, but you can stop in any time during these hours) to participate in a hands-on clinic using real 'grown up' tools to create a different, seasonally themed project monthly.

The first time you attend one of these workshops, you're asked to fill out a form (and liability release) where they capture all of your contact information (also for follow up marketing efforts) and, when you check in, the child is given a kid-sized Home Depot orange apron to keep, just like the associates wear, right down to writing their first names on them in black marker. And they also give the child a project pin that can be placed on the apron every time they attend a workshop (almost every child I've seen at the clinics brings his or her apron with them every time to show off their collection of pins; some of the children proudly displayed 50+ pins on their aprons!).

The themed projects are seasonally appropriate, the materials pre-packaged (with an instruction sheet), and can be completed at each child/adult team's individual pace. For example, the first workshop I attended with my 4- and 1 ½-year-old grandkids was in December, and the project was assembling a pre-cut wooden tree ornament with a slot to slide in your picture (the HD team took each kid's photo with a Polaroid camera), and then painting the ornament and applying holly decals.

What It Costs

The investment costs are pretty reasonable for the results achieved ... two kid-friendly associates to greet, hand out the project kits and mingle for two hours; poly sheets to protect the floors from paint and to make clean up easy (reusable); low poly coated plywood sheet/saw horse work tables (reusable); upside down orange buckets for seats (reusable); tools for completing the project (reusable); and the pre-packaged project materials (which can be purchased from premium companies or from store inventory). And, as with everything else, some planning and execution which are the keys to success. All in all, a pretty inexpensive investment to entice kids (a.k.a, future customers) and their parents/grandparents (current customers) into the stores 12 times a year! (And the HD associates I've talked with told me that they usually get 250 to 300 'teams' per store in for every kids project workshop!).

Thinking out loud, a sampling of the projects you could offer are: Halloween

decorations in October, Christmas ornaments in December, Mother's Day plantings in April, Fourth of July plantings/decorations in June, thank you gifts for teachers and day care workers in May, etc. Two of our leading industry groups, Kidsgardening.org and National Garden Bureau, have already put together some ideas to help inspire you: www.kidsgardening.org/garden-activities and www.ngb.org/2020/03/25/kids-gardening-activities.

Increasing the frequency of shop of your existing customers and simultaneously growing your future customer base, two huge paybacks with relatively minor investments. It's definitely true... big things do come in little packages. 🌱

Stan Pohmer is president of Pohmer Consulting Group in Minnetonka, Minn. He can be reached at spohmer@pohmer-consulting.com or 612.605.8799.

