

GIVE IT WINGS

Three specialty retailers share their 12 best tips to get customers flocking to your wild bird department this spring.

By Pete Mihalek

For the birds. That's an idiom with a negative connotation. But let's change all that this spring. Now's the time to take your wild bird department from stale and confusing to inspired and concise in one fell swoop.

From merchandising 101 and vendor interaction to free publicity and community awareness, *Lawn & Garden Retailer* recently sought out the expertise of three wild bird retailers because, after all, it's time to get customers shopping for the birds.

Here are 12 retail tips to give this category wings.

1. Keep It Fresh

Whether it's a loaf of bread you're talking about, or a relationship or a garden center display, when things go stale, things aren't good. That's why Melissa Block of All Seasons Wild Bird Store in Minnesota suggests going with the seasons.

"Use the seasons to remind you to update your (birding) displays," Block says. "If you don't update seasonally, at the very least, customers will see the same old thing over and over again, and that won't draw any double takes."

While your wild bird department will always have its shelf staples — seed, feeders, baths,

etc. — Block and her staff use seasonal product lines (books, puzzles, linens) to keep her displays fresh and interesting. "You've got to give them a reason to look."

2. Ask Yourself

Look to some of your favorite places to shop as retail inspiration, Block says.

"We all have our favorite stores," she says. "Stop and think; why is that your favorite place to shop? Does it feel like that when you walk into your store?" Whether it was the color the interior walls were painted, or the sounds/music you heard or the smell, take the time to figure out why you liked it.

She adds that trade shows and markets can be a retailer's best friend when looking for new display ideas.

"Look at how the vendors display things," she says. "Now they're selling to you. When you walk by booths, what catches your eye?"

3. No More Guessing

"We make sure we keep the products that belong together, together," Block says. "People who don't know anything about birds will buy inappropriate things. They start guessing."

Just like gardening, you want your customers to avoid guessing at all costs. That's why you're there, after all, and that's why you create practical displays ... to ensure their success.

4. Make a Scene

Consider incorporating a bird feeder or bird bath into every display at your garden center, Block suggests. It adds another dimension.

"I want people to see how the feeders would look hanging on a pole or how it would look as a part of their garden," she says. "People who feed birds also garden — there's such a huge correlation there."

5. Full Circle Feeders

All Seasons Wild Bird Store runs a feeder swap promotion in the spring, Block says.

"If customers bring in an old feeder of theirs, we provide them a percentage off a new feeder," she says. "Then of those that are recycled to us, we rehab the ones we can and then donate them to parks and schools."

6. Made Where?

Like many other small business owners are starting to notice, Block says consumers want



"Made-in-the-USA" products but aren't necessarily willing to pay the price for them.

"We like to carry local vendors when we can, many just within the Twin Cities area." For those locally made products, her shop uses special tags to let its customers know a given product was "Made in the Midwest."

7. Know Where to Look

Edi Crosby of WingN'It Bird Center in North Carolina is relatively new to the wild bird retail world. That said, Crosby has quite a thirst for knowledge, particularly when it comes to the products she's selling.

"I'm a firm believer in utilizing your vendors as resources to learn and improve upon the product you're selling," Crosby says. "Every one of my vendors knows who I am. Because if I'm not sure about something, I call and ask."

8. Make Them Earn It

When Crosby first started at WingN'It, she admits it was a little overwhelming when shopping vendors.

"I always asked them the same question: 'Why should I sell it?'" This way Crosby learned more about the product and also picked up some sales cues along the way.

9. Heads Up!

With his 1,400 square feet of retail space, Rich Crete of Rich's Backyard Birds considers himself the "world's smallest businessman." That said, space at his shop is tight and that's why his top merchandising tip is all about his ceiling.

"Don't neglect your drop ceiling," Crete says. "You look at the ceiling and see white tile. Why not fill it with merchandise?" In his case, this Florida retailer hangs feeders, kites and wind spinners.

10. Top-of-Mind Awareness

Crete is active in his community ... very active. In 2013 he visited five area grade schools and gave a 30-minute birding presentation to kindergartners up to fourth graders. "This doesn't cost you anything and you're creating an interest," he says.

He also hosts Brownies and Cub Scout troops. "I study their criteria for what they need to do to earn their patch or badge," he says. "Then I'll do a special presentation that will allow them to get their patch by coming to my store."

11. Social Restraint; Social Expertise

Crete explains that Facebook has been an excellent way to keep his finger on the pulse of his community.

"Neighbor Facebook groups are notorious for political debates and other nonsense that, as a community business, you shouldn't get into at the risk of alienating a customer," he says. "Don't put in your two cents unless the conversation is specific to your business. When you monitor those neighborhood pages and pop in answers when your expertise is needed, you become the go-to expert."

"After a year and a half doing this, now I'm getting questions directed to me. I've become the expert. It didn't cost me anything."

12. Write For Your Neighbors

Crete also writes birding articles for his local community paper. As the expert, he says we forget that everyone doesn't know what we know, and what's basic to an expert may be foreign to a novice.

"The key in writing an article addressing something basic is to make it a no-brainer for the editor," he explains. "Local editors for small town papers have small staffs and go insane with work. They are swamped. If they have to spend time correcting your grammar, rewriting your content, checking to make sure it's appropriate, wondering if you'll be on time, you won't get published."

Make it easy for them. Stick to word counts and don't write an article that ends up being an ad for your store. Share useful, topical information that simultaneously tags you as the expert.

"I don't get my articles published because I'm a linguistic scholar," he says. "I get published because it's a no brainer for the editor." **LGR**

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