



THINK OUTSIDE THE (BIG) BOX

Getting customers to walk out the door with products is the goal, but getting them to leave with knowledge is how IGCs can thrive.

By Fred Berns

What's it take for independent garden centers to out-market, outmaneuver and outsmart box stores and other bigger competitors with deeper pockets?

What's it take to thrive as well as survive at a time when customers have more buying options than ever before?

Successful independents are discovering it takes a combination of special classes and webinars, innovative products and services and offbeat events, along with smart marketing and outstanding customer service.

Savvy managers are offering seminars, workshops, phone apps, concierge programs, garden shows, farm dinners and much more to differentiate their garden centers from big box stores and other vendors.

"Anyone can sell a customer a plant, but not everyone can teach their customer how to be a successful gardener," explains Chris Cordrey, co-owner of East Coast Garden Center in Millsboro, Delaware.

Selling Your Expertise

East Coast hosts a radio program and makes available a variety of gardening classes.

In addition, the Delaware retailer uses its garden center as an event location, offering exercise classes, cooking and beer and wine tasting programs, murder mystery dinners and speaking engagements by such celebrities as a former NASA engineer, recalling his work on the Apollo space program.

Putting on educational events is among the most popular "beat the boxes" marketing strategies for independent garden centers.

"Offering classes is a great way for us to set

ourselves apart," says Kelli Yeager, manager of the Achin' Back Garden Center in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. "The classes help us come across as 'the gardening experts.'"

Achin' Back presents programs year-round on such topics as fruit trees, container gardening and geraniums; they are well-attended and profitable.

Yeager estimates 70 percent of the attendees make some kind of purchase on site.

At Ken Matthews Garden Center, which calls itself the "only purely home landscape-oriented garden center in the Tidewater region of Virginia," the class list includes subjects like textures, colors and low-maintenance gardens.

By serving as education and information clearinghouses, independent vendors can stand out from big box competitors and boost their bottom line in the process.

Jennifer Schamber, manager of Greenscape Gardens & Gifts in St. Louis, points out that her center has seen "a tremendous growth in customer counts and average sales receipts" since it began offering programs and information on "easy-on-the-earth" sustainable landscaping.

Greenscape is an information resource on topics like native plant species, soil management, water conservation and reduced use of lawn and garden chemicals.

"At Home Depot, customers walk out with a bottle to handle each landscaping issue," Schamber comments. "Here customers don't just buy bottles. They walk out with ideas, such as how they can introduce native plants that will attract beneficial animals and insects, like birds and butterflies."

Marketing Your Experts

Leading garden centers don't just market their

expertise, they promote their “experts” as well. They realize that they can’t do the best job of selling their products until they do the best job of selling themselves.

Nothing differentiates a company more clearly than the people who work for it, and promoting the collective experience of their team is an outstanding way for independent centers to stand out from the crowd. Market-wise companies include bios of key team members on their websites and social media sites.

Those same garden centers often point out that they offer a level of customized customer service that is unavailable at box stores.

For a South Barrington, Illinois, retailer, that service includes a Personal Garden Consultant program.

“Guests come in for a 30-minute session, bring in pictures, dimensions and drawings, talk about their needs and get the undivided attention of one of our employees,” says Sue Murdock, general manager of Goebbert’s Farm & Garden Center. “The program is a direct hit at big boxes; it’s something we can do that they can’t.”

Big box stores present only part of the marketing challenge that independent centers face, according to the owner of Woodley’s Garden Center in South Carolina.

“We are constantly in competition with not only other garden centers but also with the other ways people can spend their discretionary income,” Rick Woodley contends, adding that those “other ways” can include restaurants, entertainment and vacations.

That makes it all the more important, he says, for his company to promote itself in a wide variety of ways, including radio ads, regular newsletters and e-cards, weekly product and event website photos, a “Blooming Bucks” frequent buyer

program, fairy garden parties and other events.

“The independent garden center business has no place for complacency,” proclaims Woodley, who counts six box stores, three other garden centers and multiple grocery outlets in his area.

Many garden centers make their presence known by providing services that larger competitors don’t, or can’t.

Stonegate Gardens in Lincoln, Massachusetts, offers a Concierge Program, which includes “caring for a client’s property from pottery to garden maintenance to home decorating for the holidays.”

Moana Nursery in Reno, Nevada, offers its customers carry-out services as well as delivery, and customized planting consulting and designing services.

When you’re looking for a plant or product that Harvey’s Farm and Garden Center in Westborough, Massachusetts, doesn’t carry, your information goes into a customer request binder and you’re notified when it’s available.

Expanding Your Public Presence

Several garden centers rely on social media to distinguish themselves from big box outlets and to create buzz and business. The Good Earth Garden Center in Little Rock, Arkansas, gets out the good word on Google+, Pinterest, Vine and Instagram, as well as Facebook and Twitter. That’s in addition to the Facebook Fan of the Week contest that it started a while back.

White Oak Gardens (Cincinnati, Ohio) was the first garden center in its area to offer phone apps to distribute information about products and sales.

Many garden center managers go out into the community to share their knowledge and promote their companies. Some speak and distribute coupons at area garden clubs, while

others present weekly features on local TV news stations, and still others produce how-to YouTube videos.

Offering to be a guest on a local TV station is smart marketing at its best for garden center managers looking to stand out from big competitors. A TV appearance provides remarkable exposure and paves the way for stellar sales.

But garden centers need not go on local stations to share their expertise. They can create and distribute their own videos.

“Video is a very modern way for a center to get their message across in this visual age,” declares Luan Akin, the community outreach specialist for Tagawa

THE BLOG BENEFIT

Blogging is the focal point of many successful social media campaigns by independent garden centers.

It’s the platform through which they can establish their expertise and create top-of-the-mind awareness.

Blog posts, on topics ranging from organic weed control to outdoor kitchens, build traffic.

About 60 percent of companies that blog get more customers, according to a HubSpot survey, and websites with blogs get 55 percent more visitors than those without them.

Gardens in Centennial, Colorado. “And the potential for increased sales from these videos is huge.”

Tagawa’s videos, on such subjects as composting, spring baskets, growing garlic and watering trees, have attracted increased traffic as well as speaking invitations for company representatives at garden clubs, homeowner associations, churches, schools and elsewhere.

Featuring Your On-Site Attractions

Sometimes it’s the on-site attractions that differentiate the shopping experience at independent garden centers.

A master woodworker works on-site creating pergolas, planter boxes and more at Heights Plant Farm in Houston.

Donkeys, goats and chickens are among the featured attractions at The Natural Gardener in Austin, Texas.

The Natural Gardener also attracted attention by microbrewing at least 50 gallons of compost tea weekly, and marketing the fact that it was “the only nursery to check with a microscope to detect any microbial activity.”

The list of attractions at independent garden centers elsewhere includes things like pumpkin bowling, solar farms, honeybee academies and after work “happy hour” events featuring garden-inspired cocktails.

Creativity and ingenuity go a long way toward helping independent garden centers stand out at a time when they face more competition than any other division of the green industry.

After all, customers can turn not only to big box outlets, but also to supermarkets, convenience stores, online retailers and others for their plants, bulbs and other gardening needs.

That’s all the more reason for independent garden retailers to think outside the box (store) in their branding and marketing. **LGR**



Fred Berns coaches, writes promotional copy for and speaks to green industry professionals. He’s the author of the book “Sell Yourself! 501 Ways to Get Them to Buy from YOU.” Visit www.whatsyouronly.com or contact him at Fred@whatsyouronly.com or 303.589.3013 for more.

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