



Ask P. Allen Smith

Keep Customers Coming Back for More

Q As summer approaches, what are some surefire ways to encourage customers to keep coming back to the garden center after their initial spring planting?

There's nothing like spring at a garden center — the parking lot is full, and long lines of customers stretch through the store with carts loaded and ready to check out. But once the temperatures start to climb, that flood can quickly turn into a trickle. The challenge becomes finding ways to keep a nice, steady flow of business coming through your doors throughout the summer.

Here's a good start: Remind your customers that you have plenty of supplies for their ongoing gardening needs. While they may seek you out when they want to buy plants, it may not occur to them to head back to your business for their other gardening products once those are in the ground.

By changing up the messages in your ads and marketing strategies, you can offer solutions to the problems gardeners invariably face throughout the growing season. When they identify you as the place to get answers and products for their needs, they'll be coming back for more.

Be a Trusted Pest Buster

For instance, we all know that as new growth emerges on plants, a variety of pests emerge to dine on this buffet of fresh vegetation. An ad that says, "Are bugs after your plants?" will ring true with gardeners' experiences and draw their attention to the solution you're offering. Customers are also looking for pest-control products that are safe to use around children and pets.

A great draw would be to offer a weekend "plant doctor" clinic and encourage people to bring in a photo or example of the problem they are having with their plant. If you don't feel prepared to answer all their questions, find those who would be, such as local master gardeners. Once the problem is identified for the customers, be ready to provide the products needed to combat the issue.

Keep Wildlife in Check

Animal control is another ongoing problem that gardeners face through the summer months. One of the most frequent questions I'm asked is how to keep deer away from prized plants. What I find is that people often assign all the damage to deer when it might be other animals that are causing the problem. Providing your customers with a brand that offers a complete line of wildlife control products beyond deer — such as rabbit, groundhog, squirrel, goose, skunks or cats — is a plus. ▶



Keep customers bringing back for their summer-holiday shopping by offering ideas through patriotic vignettes or creating special promotions on seasonal merchandise. (Photo: Jane Colclasure)

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It's also important that you provide customers with information based on real experience. I've been testing the Messina's Wildlife Stopper line at the Garden Home Retreat for that very reason. Set up test plots or encourage customers to be involved in trialing products and report their experiences. Selling products that are effective and reliable is one of the best ways to develop customer loyalty.

Make an Event of It

Holidays such as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Labor Day are other occasions to remind customers to stop by your store. Themed-colored containers and hanging baskets ready to accent outdoor eating areas — along with party lights and other entertaining supplies — can provide time-strapped homeowners with quick ways to decorate their patios and decks for company. Set up an area using all your products and feature a photo in your ad or regular flyer that shows customers how they can spark up their outdoor entertaining area.

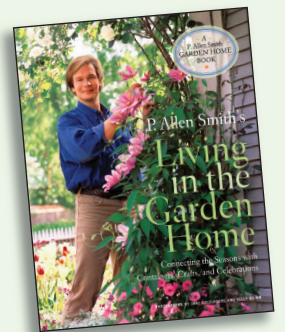
And because grilling is so popular in the summer, consider a special on fresh herbs that will enhance the meal. Offer recipes that feature the herbs from your store. Pot up some

mixed herb containers and advertise it as a great Father's Day present.

The theme through all these ideas is to keep marketing yourself. Give talks to garden clubs, send press releases to the newspaper about seminars and special events, and make journalists' jobs easier by taking photos and sending them to the paper. Educate yourself with the information you need to answer questions from customers and the local media. Get proactive and contact your local TV or radio station and offer to do a garden segment.

The bottom line: Keep up with your area, and never let your customers forget that you have what they want.

P. Allen Smith (www.pallen-smith.com) is a professional garden designer, host of two national TV programs, a regular guest on NBC's Today Show and author of P. Allen Smith's Living in the Garden Home (Clarkson Potter, 2007) and other books in the Garden Home series.



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