



Ask P. Allen Smith

Beginning the Spring Thaw Early

Q

As a garden center owner, how can I get customers excited about spring while they're still stuck in winter?

Late winter is a good time to remind customers that your garden center is a destination for their gardening supplies and services. Offer your facility as a place to host a series of pre-spring meetings for a variety of groups in your community: Master gardeners, horticultural societies and local garden clubs are always looking for speakers and venues. While they may not be purchasing much early in the season, they will remember your hospitality and

view your business as a place to get products and information.

Help Put Best Feet Forward

Prepare your facility for visiting groups by pulling together some special displays that show an array of items they will need to start the gardening season. Rather than leaving items on the shelves throughout the store, make it easy for potential customers to see products and services you offer by grouping them together. Create a col-



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orful arrangement of seed packets, potting mixes, starter trays, hand tools and garden gloves under a large sign that says, "Spring Is Almost Here!" If you offer services such as design consultations or pool maintenance, be sure to have signs clearly stating that. Show "before" and "after" photos of examples of your work and include testimonial quotes from satisfied customers.

Set up these displays near the areas where the group will be sitting or having refreshments so as they arrive and move around there is plenty of room for them to look over the items and pick up materials. This would also be a good opportunity to gather names and addresses from those who may be interested in special sale announcements or receiving your e-mail newsletter. If you will be holding other workshops or seminars through the year, have a schedule available or encourage them to sign up so you can send them a reminder.

Create an Incentive

If you can offer special discounts to certain groups, announce it during your presentation. Providing a blanket 10 percent off on purchases to Garden Club members in your community may make just enough of a difference that they will visit your store first. Follow up with customer-appreciation events, where you are open special

hours and give "gold key" customers first pick of fresh deliveries of plant materials.

Show Off Your Staff

Pre-spring events are also a good way for the public to get to know your staff. Have employees ready to meet and greet your visitors. Encourage them to introduce themselves and ask them to be near the displays, ready to engage your guests in conversation and answer their questions.

Convenience, service and a knowledgeable staff will put your garden center in front of competitors. Use this time to train your staff to be friendly and helpful. This will pay big dividends when the spring season kicks into gear.

Offer Your Expertise

Along with inviting gardening groups to your store, offer to be a speaker at meetings in other locations as well. Develop some engaging talks on topics of interest to your customers. Prepare a PowerPoint presentation with compelling photos to get them excited about the upcoming gardening season. Bring along items from your store as door prizes or giveaways to members in the audience who can answer fun questions from your presentation. Feature pictures of your store and staff. Use the time to familiarize the group with what you have to offer.

One note of caution: There is a fine line between providing helpful information and sounding like a commercial. A good way to stay on the right side of that line is to prepare a handout with information relevant to your talk and, on the bottom or back side of the handout, provide information about your store and services.

Late winter and early spring is also a good time to host a few select school groups. This is a way to pick up some local press and let teachers and parents know about your support. Look into becoming a partner in education with one or more of your local schools. You could offer to visit the school grounds or classrooms and give talks to students on garden-related topics of interest. It's never too early to encourage an interest in gardening.

P. Allen Smith (www.pallensmith.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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