

everything I ever needed to know...



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In the years since moving to Chicago, I have become an avid baseball fan. I count the days until spring training starts, I get to the ballpark as often as possible, and I've even started remembering batting averages. Yes, it's fair to say I've got it pretty bad. I'm even proud to admit, at least this year, that I'm a White Sox fan. (As I write this the Sox have the best record in the majors at 22 and 8.) So I was pretty excited this morning when I realized that everything you need to know about running a garden center you can learn from baseball. For example:

Fundamentals win the game. Any coach will tell you that you can't count on homeruns; making outs and getting base hits win games. So what are the fundamentals of running a garden center? Having healthy plants in full bloom, creating attractive displays, providing good customer service. These are the foundation for everything else. If they are lacking, so will anything you do.

But big plays make the show. All that said, you don't get fans on their feet with an easy-catch fly ball; the big plays steal the show. Big plays are what people talk about after they leave the ballpark; big plays are what get news coverage; they are what people pay upwards of \$30 a seat for. What are the big plays at your garden center? Is it a single crop that you've excelled at? Your expertise at merchandising? There has to be something spectacular about your store to get people talking about it.

Being there is an experience. Watching a game on television is fine, but it's nothing like being at the ballpark...feeling the sun on your face, hearing the crowd, smelling the hot dogs. Everything comes together to create something better than its parts. What is the experience of your garden center? Does it appeal to all of the senses? Is it a fun place to visit or a necessary evil?

Without a strong leader, egos take over. When you make \$15 million a year, it's hard not to have an ego, but a good coach can minimize its effect on the rest of the team. And while you're not paying anyone \$15 million, you might still have \$15-million egos. Everyone, and I do mean everyone, on your team will need to be managed. Are you that kind of manager?

Uniforms can work to your advantage or disadvantage. If you've seen the uniforms in baseball then you know what I mean. True, all of the players are identifiable, but the message sent out by thick polyester and tight-fitting pants is never good. What kind of message are your uniforms sending? Are they relaxed and cheerful? Useful to employees yet easily identifiable to customers?

Loyalty fills seats. No one knows this better than a Chicago sports fan. At the end of the season, when your team is struggling to make .500 there will still be fans at each and every game. Loyal fans love their team. They love it when it's winning as much as when it's not; they love it when it's raining as much as when the sun shines; they love their team through the constant shuffle of players, lock-outs and drug scandals. Do you inspire this kind of loyalty in your customers? It sounds crazy, but it does actually happen. There are people who can't wait to start their weekend at the local garden center; people who would never think about shopping around for a better price; people who would never break soil without talking to you first. That's the kind of customer for you.

I could go on and on, but since I'm almost out of space. I'll stop. I guess I was just a little surprised to learn that the basic principles of good business apply almost anywhere, whether you're running a \$1-million garden center or a multi-million dollar baseball franchise. In fact, now that it's all down in black and white, I'm even

starting to think that the staff of *Lawn & Garden Retailer* might need to hit the ballpark to do a little more industry research before we start the next issue.

Coming in July...

Management:

Controlling insects/diseases at the garden center

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LAWN & GARDEN Retailer

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