

MANAGEMENT

GETTING THE MOST FROM SEASONAL EMPLOYEES

Many businesses need extra employees at different times of year — but especially during the holidays. Here are some helpful tips to make sure you hire the right seasonal employees and get the most out of them in your garden center.

By Carol Hacker

It's that time of year again. Many lawn and garden centers are anticipating their busiest holiday season ever! However, the surge in sales and service that is about to take place may create a need for additional staff. Many businesses rely on seasonal help to fill the voids and meet the demands of their customers, and you may be part of this head count. Whether you currently hire seasonal employees or anticipate doing so for the first time this season, this article will discuss how to get the most from seasonal employees starting with making good hiring decisions.

The "season" varies with the type of business. Depending on where you are located in the country, your season may be year round or primarily spring, summer, fall or winter or a combination of several seasons. The November/December holidays are typically a big "season" for many lawn and garden centers. Whether you're hiring for six weeks or four months, it's important to find and hire the best people for the job even when you hire seasonal employees. You can't get the most out of them if you don't have the right people. They are no less important to your business and profitability than your regular employees.

Are Seasonal Employees Necessary?

The first question you want to ask yourself is "Are seasonal workers really needed?" Despite their importance, seasonal employees are not the answer for all businesses. Small, 1- or 2-person operations may prefer to rely on family members or trusted friends during the busy holiday season. This strategy eliminates the hassle of interviewing, hiring and training people for a temporary need. Plus, you know these people and what they can and cannot do. Just be sure you don't take advantage of them because you know them well; that's not what "getting the most out of your seasonal employees" means.

Larger businesses have the same seasonal hiring concerns as smaller businesses. However, if the plants, flowers, Christmas trees or holiday merchandise require special expertise to sell, you may not be able to hire someone off the street just for the season. Consider hiring former seasonal

or regular employees or asking your current employees to work more hours. Businesses that employ seasonal employees face a multifaceted challenge that includes decisions about when to hire, how many to hire, where to find suitable applicants and how to train new hires.

Conduct A Needs Evaluation

Because you will want to get the most from every seasonal employee, you will want to evaluate your specific needs for that time of year.

- What are the anticipated sales for this season?
- How many seasonal employees do you think you will need?
- Will they work full time or part time?
- For what length of time will you need their services?
- What additional responsibilities will seasonal employees handle that your current employees don't have time to do?
- Will there be an opportunity for regular full-time or part-time employment afterwards, especially for your best seasonal workers?

Strong economic growth and a fairly low unemployment rate in many areas of the country have made it more difficult for businesses to fill their regular job openings, much less their seasonal positions. The lesson here is don't wait until the last minute to begin searching for seasonal employees.

This can be particularly important for small businesses that don't have a human resources department to handle recruiting. Advertise, interview, make job offers and set starting dates for seasonal employees weeks or even months in advance. After you've gotten commitments from people that you have offered jobs to and they've accepted, stay in touch with them. Don't assume just because they said they would work for you and start in 30 days that they might not get a better offer from your competition, which includes all retail businesses.

A quick phone call placed periodically or a note or E-mail reminding them of how much you are looking forward to them joining your team can make a difference between a "no show" and a seasonal employee who is eager to hit the ground running!



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Take Every Hiring Decision Seriously

When you begin interviewing seasonal applicants, treat the matter seriously. While you may not conduct the same in-depth interview for a seasonal position that you would for a full-time, regular position, take as much time as you need to get to know each applicant. Consider appearance and attitude; attitude is critical.

What about previous retail experience? If they lack experience but seem ideal in every other way, are you willing to train them? What will the training entail and who will conduct it? Will it be on an individual basis or in a group setting? What kind of follow up to the training will be provided, and to whom can seasonal employees turn when they have questions or encounter problems?

Be Prepared

You don't have a prayer when it comes to getting the most out of your seasonal help if you don't take time for a brief but meaningful orientation to your business and the job. Start by defining expectations. There is a direct correlation between the success of new employees and the understanding of what is expected of them. Your goal is to get your seasonal employees up to speed ASAP.

You can quickly cut the learning curve in half by defining expectations. To quote the late behavioral psychologist Dr. Kurt Einstein, "To the degree that people know what's expected, to the same degree they can succeed." I personally would not consider owning a business and taking on the responsibility for managing a team of employees



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without defining expectations and following up to make sure everyone understands their job responsibilities and my expectations of them.

Getting the most out of your seasonal employees also means training them. You are extremely busy and may not feel you have time to give seasonal workers the guidance they need. This is a huge mistake that can be costly when customers are impacted by seasonal employees' lack of knowledge or insensitivity to customers' needs.

For example, maybe one of your full-time employees teaches the new hire the bare bones of operating a cash register, stocking shelves, handling returns or working in the warehouse and assumes the matter will take care of itself. Assume

nothing. A perfectly smooth transition from applicant to seasonal employee rarely happens.

While an experienced employee may handle the job with minimal training, the inexperienced worker requires extra time. Otherwise, someone invariably will spend time correcting the mistakes and resolving the problems created by the seasonal employee's lack of experience and knowledge. Who is at fault when that happens? You guessed it!

Keep in mind that transitioning into a new job, whether seasonal or regular, brings about heightened anxiety on the part of many new employees. Jump start your relationship as the owner or manager by helping seasonal employees get to know all of their coworkers as well as deal with workplace stress during the busy holiday season.

For example, what do you expect from your seasonal employees when an unhappy customer returns a box of expensive but broken Christmas ornaments and demands a refund, claiming they were broken when she bought them but didn't realize it? The seasonal hire may not have a clue about how to handle a situation like this any more than the seasonal employee who must deal with a customer who attempts to steal a tree off the lot or take an item from the store when no one is watching. Successfully launching a new employee into your business will require training and one-on-one discussions, as well as group meetings. Don't forget the importance of respect for your seasonal employees as people. If they feel that you are treating them like second-class citizens, you're asking for trouble.

Provide Competitive Pay

Getting the best out of all employees, including seasonal ones, requires you to evaluate your compensation and benefits package. Be aware of what other area businesses offer in terms of pay so you

can be competitive. You don't have to pay the most, but if you pay the least, you will have a tough time keeping full-time regulars or seasonal employees.

If your seasonal jobs don't pay the same hourly rate as full-time, regular positions, offer discounts on merchandise, paid lunch breaks, a flexible schedule and/or plenty of hours for those who want the extra work and the possibility of a bonus for exceeding goals and top performance. Benefits are especially attractive if you can't offer the same hourly rate as your competition. Also, consider offering a higher pay rate to experienced former seasonal workers to encourage them to return.

Give Critical Feedback

One of your most important tasks is to provide constructive criticism as needed. Criticism is difficult for most people to accept. It's also not easy to give. Failure can create defensiveness. Often it's not what is said but how it's said.

A popular but poor approach is the "sandwich technique" where the critic "sandwiches" the negative comments between beginning and ending words of praise. Employees soon learn that when the boss starts with praise, it will lead to criticism. This creates conflicting messages.

Effective criticism is given in the helping spirit and is designed to promote change for the better. Unless you want the individual to quit or you plan to terminate, all criticism should be encouraging with the goal of improvement. If you want to get the most from your seasonal employees, you need to know how to give critical feedback and make your employees appreciate it. The key is a desire to practice open communication.

Be A Coach, Not A Cop

It can be easy to forget your responsibility to seasonal employees who do a good job. After all, they're



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only with you for the short term. Unfortunately, sometimes owners or managers become cops when they focus more on criticism and discipline than on helping people maximize potential.

Even though the poor performers are the minority, they oftentimes get more than their share of attention. Certain problems are inevitable and everyone makes mistakes, but you must learn to manage troublesome issues as they arise. Ignoring problems isn't the way to lead a team. It takes being a coach. Here's how:

What went wrong? You will have to find out why things have gone wrong. Address the problem early. Also consider what irritates you personally. You may find that some things are just annoying and are not worth addressing, at least not if you want to maintain a good relationship with your seasonal employees.

Narrow your view. Focus on the most disruptive problems:

- Define all the recurring problems and prioritize them so that you can tackle the most difficult first.
- Look below the surface; be sure you know the real cause of the problem.
- Analyze the problem to determine who or what is actually responsible.
- Tackle the problem; decide how you're going to handle it and do something about it.

Know what to expect. In coaching a poor performer, expect misunderstanding and denial. Be

sure you're accurate, clear and impartial. Watch for falsely placed blame.

You get what you give. Keep in mind that you will get what you expect, model and reward.

Follow up. Although you have asked for change, you will find people tend to fall back into their old habits. Your seasonal employees may not always do what you expect, but acknowledge that they are trying. Encourage and reward progress. Being a cop is a difficult job. The payoff is in being a coach and helping to develop a winning team!

Take Notes

The successful use of seasonal employees depends in large part on how a business applies what it learns from one season to another. Make notes about what did or didn't work in the past. Keep a list of experienced employees that you may want to contact the next time you're looking for seasonal help. Hire the best you can afford and plan for retention.

Why employees stay is more important than why they leave. For many, how they are treated means more to them than what you pay them. A pleasant physical environment can be a great motivator as well as social interaction and an emotionally supportive boss. In addition, make employee recognition an integral part of your organization's business and people strategy. Think ahead and make the seasonal-employee aspect of your business easier to manage and more profitable all the way around! 🌿



Make sure seasonal employees are properly trained to handle everything from the cash registers to customer interaction.

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