

# Low-Cost Marketing Ideas

What are garden centers doing to develop successful, low-cost marketing strategies?

By Morgan Muir

**C**reative ways to advertise and market products, companies and events are conceived every day, each one bigger and better than the one before. Larger companies can even afford to hire agencies to do all of their thinking for them. At the end of the day, these companies are spending millions of dollars on marketing.

But what about smaller businesses that want their voices heard, too? In a country where bigger is better and more is never enough, these smaller businesses may find it difficult to compete with companies who have the capital to invest in advertising and mar-

keting agencies. Promoting products and store merchandise might seem easier said than done. However, with a little creativity and a lot of in-house production, there are low-cost marketing strategies that can make smaller businesses successful.

These five garden centers from across the country have established and designed cost-effective advertising techniques that have created more business and increased sales. From loyalty programs and community projects to signage in restroom facilities, representatives from these garden centers talk of their successes and failures in low-cost marketing.



◀ "The information boards used in the restrooms are the most unique and least-costly marketing tool. We have two bulletin boards posted near the exits of each of the restrooms. These boards display gardening information, local seasonal events, seasonal interests for our store and garden center newsletters. Our restrooms are not your run-of-the-mill restrooms. We use this area to feature merchandise. DeWayne's sister [the owner] Debra creates unique seasonal displays [throughout our store]; the designs in our restrooms include wall hangings, swags, mirrors, seasonal home accents and even Christmas trees. Customers are always commenting on just how attractive our restrooms are. Many pieces have been sold from this display space; it allows the shopper to see it displayed as they may have it in their home entryways or other areas in their homes.

"To further promote flowers in bloom from the garden center and nursery areas, flyers are created and displayed using photos of our custom displays designed by our garden center staff. Various areas from our gift shop are also featured to promote a hot new item or an area that is 'in season.' Attractive displays using patio furniture, fountains and container gardens are also photographed and posted on these boards to create awareness of new product lines in our outdoor living area."

— **Marcia Woodall, DeWayne's Home and Garden Showplace, Selma, N.C.**

This is a hydrangea display created by DeWayne's nursery crew showing a variety of products all in shades of blue. This display promotes seasonal plants, garden accents and soil amendments. (Photo: DeWayne's Home and Garden Showplace)



▶ “The biggest thing we do this time of year [summer] would be any time we do a speaking engagement, a parade or anything local we always pass out a 10-percent coupon for the rest of the year. Those coupons, when they’re redeemed, are about twice our average sale. When people come in, they save the coupons up for something they’re maybe looking for in September or during the Christmas season. They know they’re going to use them, so the customers kind of keep them for that bigger purchase. That really has helped us out a lot, especially this time of year. We try to hold off on doing a lot of them in the springtime because we feel like we’re giving away the margin at that point. But this time of year, that’s a really big deal for us.

“The other thing that works really well for us is converting all of our donations into gift baskets. For so long, we’re always being known as the plant place. So all of our gift baskets now are about a lot of the things that people don’t understand that we carry. And we always make sure we enclose a gift card in each one of those so [customers] do have to come into our store and see us for the first time. A lot of those people have never been [our] customers beforehand, and I think they’ve always known us for one thing — our landscape company. So it surprises them when they come in and see all of the gifty stuff we do.”

— John O’Reilly, Otten Bros. Nursery & Landscape Inc., Long Lake, Minn. ▶

By donating gift baskets instead of gift certificates, garden centers can advertise a variety of store merchandise that potential customers may not be aware they carry. (Photo: Otten Bros.)



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▶ “One that’s very, very inexpensive is partnering with local like-type businesses. These are businesses that don’t sell what we sell but may have the same customers. For example, invisible fences for dogs. Those people have

property, and if they get an invisible fence or are interested in it, they may be gardeners. So we’ve said, ‘Ok, [invisible fence] company, you can put a kiosk in our store and promote your business, but we want to put our literature in all of

your packets that you send out to clients and perspective clients.’ And another thing we do is sell the batteries for the dog collars so [customers] can come in here and, of course, now they’re in our store.



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Shopping PASS - present at register

Waterloo Gardens' Family and Friend Night is an inexpensive way to advertise to neighbors and neighboring businesses. All the printing can be done in-house and all of the fliers can be distributed employees. (Photo: Waterloo Gardens)

“Tree services would be another like-type company. We don’t service trees, we sell them, and they don’t sell trees, they service them. So that seems like a pretty good marriage.

“We also have a friend-and-family night. We have some employees print these coupons for one night when we have a percentage off our store for several hours. And we go to our neighboring businesses and say, ‘Hey, we’re having a friends-and-family night and we want you to come to our store for 30-percent off everything.’ It gets us in front of perspective customers and creates a nice community event. We have all of our employees giving them to their neighbors, so you’re really paying nothing more than the printing of the coupons. And we call them a Shopping Pass instead of a coupon. It gets [customers] in and gives them the discount.”

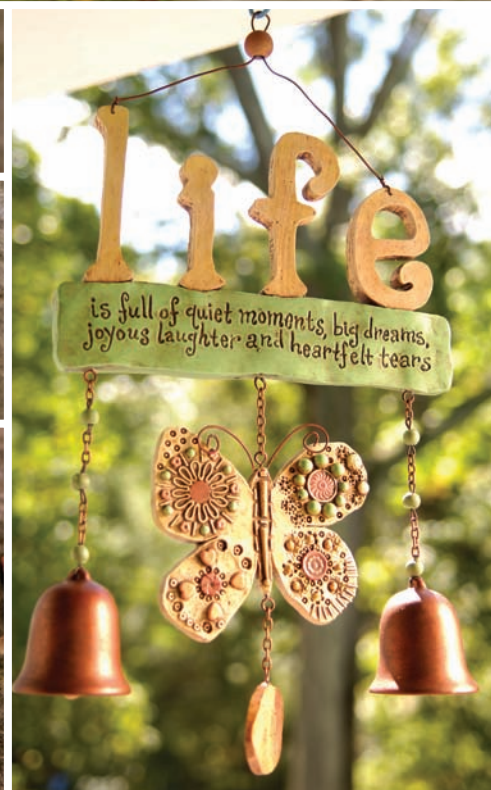
— Tim Shauer, Waterloo Gardens, Exton, Penn. ▶



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► "I feel like taking care of our customers is our best advertisement, because if they're happy, hopefully, they're either going to come back or tell someone else. We've tried to put a lot of our advertising dollars that were previously spent on newspapers into the experience of the customer, trying to make things a little bit better and make them happy.

"We don't do radio and newspaper advertising, but one thing we do for the newspapers is write a gardening column every week and send that to the [local newspaper]. The most effective results have been when we get mentioned in [another] paper or something. What we're trying to do is put our advertising money into free publicity.

"We have seen [our articles] in other places, other garden centers. Even Home Depot had them laminated once. We had one on fall grasses, and the store had it up by its grass displays. I think Home Depot did our mums article once, too. It's neat when our articles are in other places.

"Another thing The Planter's Palette has is The Planter's Palette Surplus Sale. It requires no extra mailings or advertising. They post small in-store banners and signs telling current customers in August about annuals from the end of spring that are on sale. It's made our August as big as our September. That used to always be more of a slower month."

— David Tyznik, *The Planter's Palette, Winfield, Ill.* ▶



The Planter's Palette Surplus Sale requires no extra mailings or advertising. The company posts small in-store banners and signs telling current customers in August about annuals from the end of spring that are on sale. (Photo: Planter's Palette)

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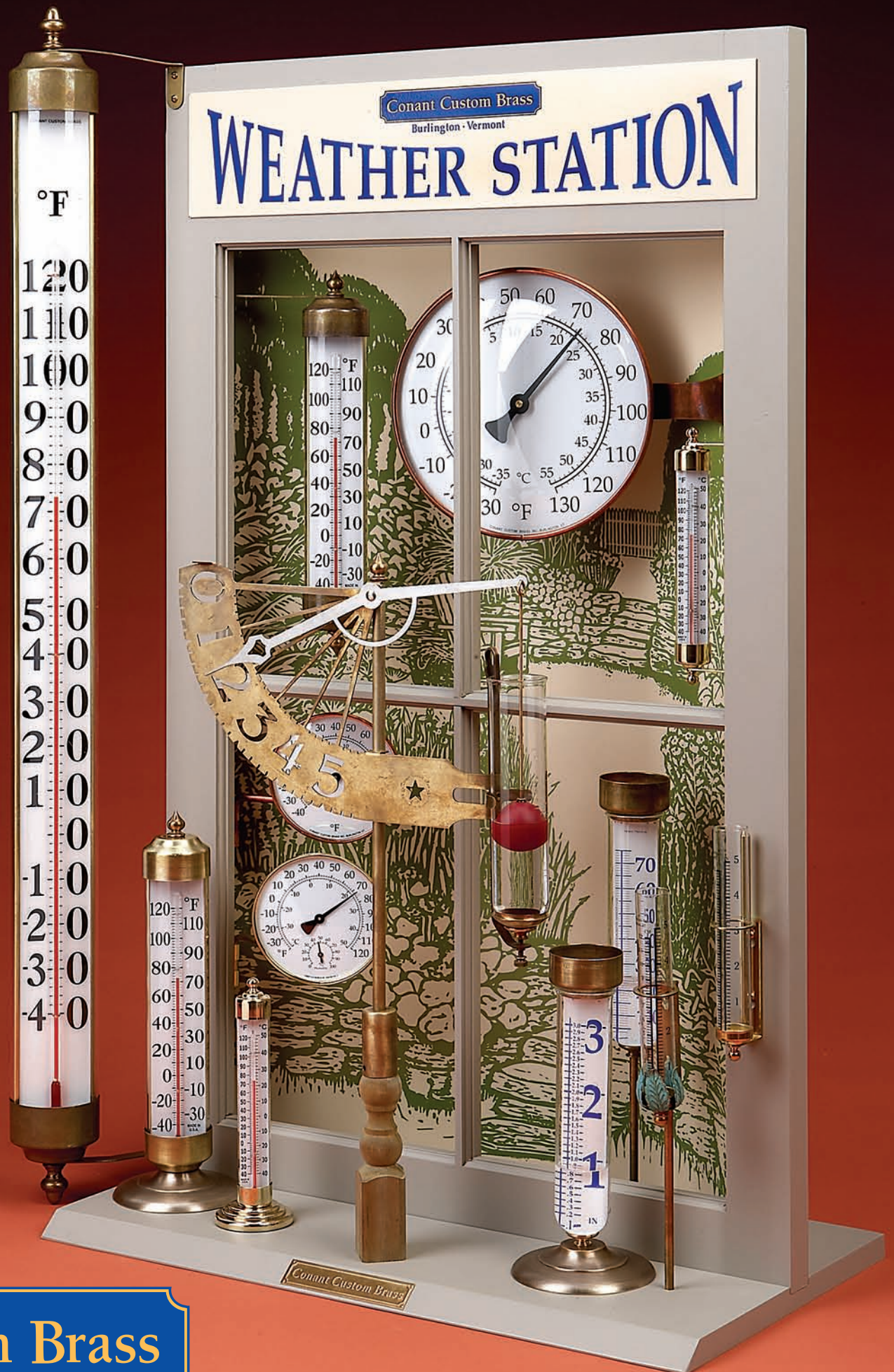
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## PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIS

▶ "One of the really low-cost things we did was print our own photocopies, cut them up into coupon sizes and put them in customers' bags to promote seminars and special sales to existing

customers that are coming through the store. That seems to work pretty well because we get lots of feedback on those and everybody who leaves the store leaves with



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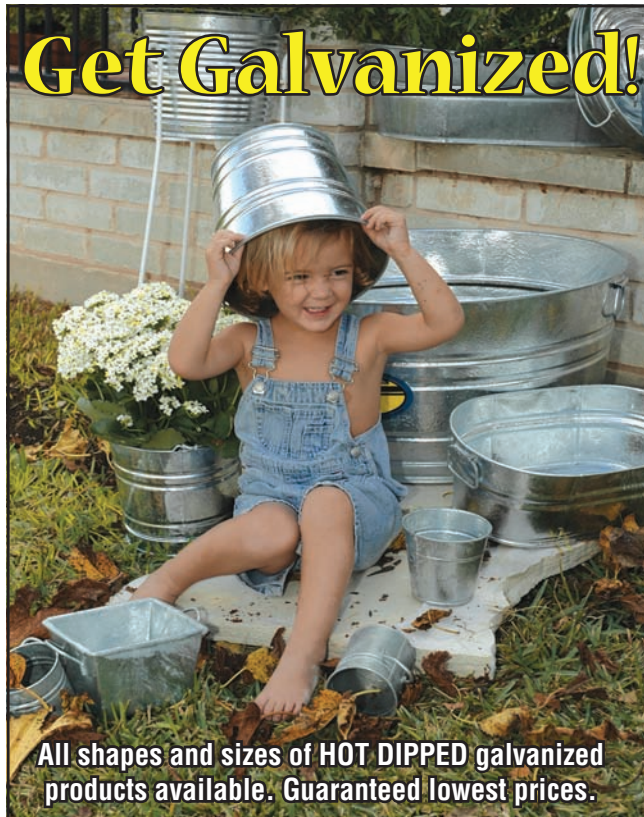
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Having an interchangeable marquee on the highway is an effective way to advertise to customers who commute past your store every day but may not think to shop there. (Photo: Fairfield Garden Center)

one. It only costs you as many as you get in return if you're doing a sale, so it's a pretty cost-effective way.

"Another low-cost thing we've done is distributed at a home and garden show a coupon printed up that, again, we did in-house with the computer, and it looked like a gift certificate for \$10 off the next purchase of \$50 or more. It was kind of neat because we handed it away at a home and garden show, and it looked like we were giving away a \$10 gift certificate to shop at our store. That worked out pretty well, and we got some responses from that. And we used that during the winter months because that's when the shows were taking place. I know it was pretty effective. Last year was the first year we did that, and we'll probably do something similar to it again this year. Those are probably two of the easiest, low-cost marketing things we do. Anything that can be done in-house seems to be the way to go for low cost."

— Frank Fernicola, Jr.,  
Fairfield Garden Center,  
Fairfield, N.J.

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