



Finding the Time to Train

By Pete Bottomley

I like to compare the workload at garden centers to summer thunderstorms; when the action happens, it arrives fast and furious, and it's usually more than we can handle. This is where the time crunch really hits. Since we can't stand to see any wasted runoff, so to speak, we work as hard as we can as long as we can to harness the deluge!

When things slow down in the summer, it's hard to forget the recent 6- to 8-week frenzy that we just barely survived. It's time to recuperate and prepare for the fall promotions and the holidays. It becomes easy to think back and be convinced that there's just not enough time to add anything extra, especially training.

LESS IS MORE

Over the last year, I have called several hundred garden centers to introduce the idea of meeting and training as a team every week for 30 minutes. Here's what I have learned: No matter what season it is, there's always something going on that keeps prospects from taking a moment to consider the benefits that are available through training. "Wait!" I plead, "Don't hang

up! I want to help you have *more time!*" Click.

Seriously, I can't help you have any more time; what I really want to do is let you know there is a way for you to do more with your time; it's called delegating responsibility. I'm talking about engaging your staff with the planning, as well as the execution, of your company's overall strategy and details. Encourage them to think like owners.

Now, I know you're saying that's easier said than done. For some, letting go of control pushes the limits of comfort. In the end, it's a choice you will have to make. If you are truly happy and fulfilled with your business and your part in it, you probably aren't reading this article in the first place. If you're feeling perhaps there's a way you can get more done and make more money, with less effort, then you might consider sacrificing some of your comfort and personally-rewarding hands-on activities for the future growth of your company.

Here's where I throw out the counterintuitive idea that weekly meetings will make everyone's work time more productive. Your team members will discuss marketing, merchandising, teamwork, systems and cost-control methods. They'll contribute their creative ideas for promotions and then, because they are engaged, they will dedicate themselves to making their ideas succeed. All you have to do is support and reward their efforts. I have seen consistent communication and team-based training generate amazing results in dozens of great garden centers. It's important to note that a meeting here and there, every once in a while, won't generate the results

you want. Consistency, week after week, month after month, delivers measurable improvements — that's why it's called training!

CREATING TIME

Now, how does your company find an extra 30-45 minutes each week for the whole team to get together? Unfortunately, I don't have the definitive answer to that question. I can tell you it is a faith commitment at the beginning because it does take consistency and persistence to show results. Here's what some of my clients in the Training Challenge do: Most meet before the store opens on Tuesdays, while several other garden center teams meet after work. One company has shown that it can train its full-time staff in the middle of the day while the part-timers run the store. (Customers are impressed to see them training.) The most amazing thing my clients and I have learned so far? It's easier to hold the weekly meeting when it's busy and the adrenalin is flowing freely. The hardest times to train consistently are the dog days of summer and after the winter holidays.

Okay, are you ready to get your team started? Are you ready to free yourself to concentrate on growing your business? Here's the three-step program to do more with your time: 1) Commit to paying your team to convene for a company meeting once a week, every week. 2) Delegate the job of organizing your company's weekly meetings to a member of your staff, preferably not a manager. (See the Invaluable Training Coordinator in the September 2002 issue of *Lawn & Garden Retailer*) and 3) Empower your team members to meet without you. Get them started,

create some excitement, set the tone, lay the ground rules, hold them accountable and get out of the way so they can take ownership. They will amaze you.

This may sound like some radical, free-spirited thinking, but it's not that far-fetched. It's part of the culture at Ritz-Carlton, where the staff meets and trains every week. As another example, I remember seeing the employees at a Chili's restaurant meet for one minute and then break with a loud cheer; their energy filled the air. A weekly training meeting is simply a discipline to take the time to slow down, think, connect the team, set goals, learn from each other, grow confidence and get fired up.

The process of consistent meetings and constant training helps employees learn the fundamentals of business and start thinking like owners, which, in the long run, increases payroll efficiency. As an additional benefit, they become your garden center's best marketing medium by learning to connect well with customers. And, lest I forget the purpose of this article, if your staff is carrying more of your responsibilities, you will have the luxury of focusing your time on the big picture issues and move your company ever closer towards your vision. ♦

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CHALLENGE CALENDAR

24 Participating garden centers

248 Average number of employees trained per week

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April Training Topics:

"Teamwork and Team Building"

"Greeting Customers"

"Recommending Solutions"

"Everyone into Sales"



ACTION ZONE: GARDEN CENTERS IN TRAINING

Market. Barco's Liberty Gardens, Medina, Ohio, focused on determining its unique selling proposition in its "What separates us from the Competition" session. The team discussed the importance of promoting its store's positive attributes through one-on-one communication, as well as its traditional marketing methods. This is an excellent idea. The best time to market ourselves is when the customer is right in front of us.

A new presenter stepped up to discuss the Marketing and Promotions section of the company manual at Anderson Home and Garden Showplace, Newport News, Va. As part of the session, the facilitator brought out a very important idea to keep in mind: Do not underestimate the purchasing power of our customers. Garden centers in high-end markets offer expensive products, items that employees may

not be able to afford or justify purchasing. "Just because we wouldn't be able to afford something shouldn't dissuade us from confidently offering it to a customer," said the facilitator.

Teamwork. Wayne's Country Market, Mansfield, Ohio, has already seen an improvement in communication because of its weekly meeting schedule. It has found that the best benefit is the 30 minutes of slowing down together as a team.

Training. Employees at Kennedy's Country Gardens, Scituate, Mass., watched infomercials this week — now wait a minute! It turns out they didn't tune in to cable television; they came up with their own 90-second commercials for a series of house plants they sell. Each participant pulled a plant name out of a hat and accepted the challenge to present as much info as

possible in 90 seconds. The process was fun and interactive. They will use the same process for other plants in the nursery during future sessions.

Bayview Nurseries and Garden Center of Northfield, N.J., divided the crew into teams of two and sent the pairs out to "shop" and evaluate the readability of the store's signage and labeling and the effectiveness of specific service areas. This technique generated ideas and suggestions to make the garden center more customer-friendly.

Systems. The team at Roosevelt Trail Garden Center, Windham, Maine, dove into its manual this week and divided it into four separate binders: The Nursery Procedures manual, Cash Register Procedures, Gift Certificates and the 2003 Price List. The information is now more accessible.

Cost control. Wojo's Green-

houses, Ortonville, Mich., went over the realities of profit margins with its team. The actual numbers were a real eye opener. Employees tend to think businesses and business owners make far more than they really do; that's why you might as well just tell 'em how it really is.

Rewards. Pleasant View Gardens, Loudon, N.H., talked about motivation this week. The team evaluated the effectiveness of rewards and recognition as performance motivators. They discussed setting goals at the beginning of each day and came up with some ideas to positively reinforce a job well done. As a motivational experiment, the team tried to convince someone to stand up on a chair by booing, clapping and offering a candy reward. Different things motivate different people; great managers strive to learn each person's unique needs. ❧