

with Dana Altum Gibson

# my life is so much better

Indy retailer on delegating, driving the biz and dropping the singing fish.

By Mitch Whitten



**W**ith her brother, Robert, Dana Altum Gibson is co-owner of Altum's Horticultural Center in the Indianapolis suburb of Zionsville, Ind. Despite nearby road construction, which choked her spring business, Gibson was more optimistic than ever about the future of her family enterprise.

How has Altum's become more of a marketing-driven company?

We have more control over what customers come in for. We find something that's cool and then inject that excitement into our customers so they say "I want that, too."

How do you identify the hot sellers worth promoting?

We're trying to do more planned buys. We bought 200 Dreamland zinnias last year. People ate them up. We reordered 1,000. This year, we put the plant on the front of a postcard mailed to our 5,000 best customers. Now, in late spring, we have just a couple hundred left.

That's a nice arrangement, but isn't the industry still struggling to give the consumer the plants she likes?

It's a relationship you must have with your grower. If you're going to get a planned marketing event for a perennial, you have to book that almost a year ahead of time so they can grow them and get them ready. We have three smaller growers who do a good job for us. We just tell them what we want, and they grow it.

In the '90s, a lot of garden centers went off the deep end with gifts, trying to could balance seasonal plant sales with accessories. How do you avoid that?

We used to sell everything related to the garden. Now, we're focusing on functional garden accessories, like pottery, which is huge, and tools; our customers are huge on tools. They like specific tools and gimmicky stuff, such as a comfort-grip trowel or nice pruners, \$25 gloves, kneelers and ladies' shovels.

OK, tell our readers one of your favorite bad buys.

We sold Billy Bass, the singing fish. We're

also phasing out anything that's seasonal because every mega store has that.

Do you stick to staples or try to chase trends?

Our customers all want to be on the cutting edge. It's whatever's going to look good in the garden for three years. We're such a fast-paced society. Women redecorate the house every 3-5 years. And they do that with the garden too.

Besides nearby road construction, to what do you attribute the downward trend this spring?

We're losing one-time shoppers. They're not coming at all or they're coming once and maybe not coming back. About 59 percent of our customers only come one time a year.

Just getting that information is a big accomplishment.

We can track all of our customers. We do not sell our list. We use it to mail our customers promotional postcards and information. And we track their purchases so they don't have to carry their receipt when making a return.

There is often a gulf between getting and actually using that information.

In the past 18 months, when we hired a person for marketing, we've been able to access the information we've been collecting at point of sale. She's in charge of customers, products, setting up the marketing plan, working with sales staff and buyers.

I think our very first conversation had something to do with our common interest in displays. They have to look sharp, consistently.

It's nice to have a pretty display, but you have to make sure people can shop it, and you need to have accessories next to it. For example, we have a potted jasmine display. Next to the display, we have fertilizer and pots — so customers can take one home or make their own. We have a vignette fragrance garden. All the plants we used are available right next to it.



This is our first spring since 9/11. Any lasting effects?

Everyone's re-evaluating their lives these days. We have actually had more people from the corporate world apply for jobs. They want to do something more fulfilling than just drive a paycheck.

Altum's  
Horticultural Center

Sales: Over \$3 million

Locations: Zionsville, Ind.

Space: 20,000 sq. ft. covered  
selling, 7,500 square-foot gift  
shop, one acre retail nursery

Top category: Nursery stock  
for new residential develop-  
ments

Landscape since: 1958