

DEFENDING YOUR PRICE POINT

The mass merchants have taken care of providing low prices; find out how to defend your higher prices.

By Beverly Schor

“Defending your price point,” sounds more like a duel, than a strategy. It has the same guerrilla warfare ring to it as “fighting for profitability.” However, by taking the long view and working to establish a reputation for quality and service, a foundation for profitability emerges, and defending becomes building. Quality and service add significant value for the customer, and of the three elements — price, quality and service — the last two are the least likely to be imitated by the competition successfully and the most likely to keep good customers.

This business model requires dedication and risk taking. It also requires a huge investment in time, research and commitment. It’s a commitment to the long term as opposed to the short gain. Each sale becomes an opportunity to build a sound business.

Customers today have access to more information than ever. Comparative shopping is available in just a few computer keystrokes or in the apparent “huge” selection of products offered by the mass merchants. Ironically, the very size and scale of both these models give independent retailers and small companies a big selling opportunity. While each dealer may not be able to compete in size, they can successfully differentiate themselves by building a reputation for quality and service on a personal level. These qualities cannot be “shopped on-line,” nor can their value be under sold. They certainly never go on sale. It’s truly a “one customer at a time” approach to business.

A CASE STUDY

As a small manufacturer, we are faced with the same problems as the independent retailer. We have to differ-



entiate ourselves on more than just price. We don’t have the volume and deep pockets to compete with the big guys. Our strength lies in our uniqueness and our desire to produce the best product on the market.

It’s been many, many years since I started my career as a costumer for a local theatre company, but I learned several invaluable lessons that have stayed with me and that I can apply to the lawn and garden industry. First, costumes had to be built to last, as repertory shows often played for months. Costumes had to survive hot lights, sweat and considerable stress, just like gardening tools have to survive heat, sweat, dirt, etc. Second, quality materials “played;” they always looked better than the cheap or easy solution. There was nothing like three banks of unforgiving theatre lights to show up flaws or defects. My work had to look good under hot lights close up and from 200 yards away, so we always had to find the best materials and solutions for the overall quality of the show.

Later, when I became a serious athlete and designer in the outdoor industry, I learned another valuable lesson. Clothing became “gear.” It had to perform, and it had to last. It had to *support* the athletic experience, not *be* the experi-



Clockwise from top: **Garden Tools.** Monrovia’s new premium garden tool line is crafted with detail, a high strength-to-weight ratio and a functional, ergonomic design to provide ideal balance for gardeners of all sizes and levels of gardening enthusiasm. Each set comes with a handsome display tree. Monrovia. (800) 999-9321. (Write in 1470); **Rain collection system.** The Oasis Rain Collection System features two brass spigots threaded for garden hose attachment, a screened lid and overflow outlet. Available in stone texture colors as well as solid terra cotta, the product is offered in two sizes including a flat-back space saver model, with a 50-gal. capacity. Gardenware Canada. (877) 440-7246. (Write in 1466); **Hygrometer.** The Champlain Weather Combination combines a thermometer and hygrometer into one useful wall unit. The light-antique, solid-copper housing will add beauty and function wherever it’s mounted. Conant Custom Brass. (800) 832-4482. (Write in 1459)

Lawn cart

The LUVcart System is a battery-powered motorized lawn utility vehicle. The environmentally friendly, three-wheeled, self-propelled cart can effortlessly haul up to 200 lbs. The cart has a 5-cubic-ft. carrying capacity and moves along at a comfortable pace of 2 mph by simply pushing the pad at the operator's fingertips. Each LUVcart System comes with a 12-volt, maintenance-free rechargeable battery, a battery charger and built-in tool storage tray and cup holder. Cartcraft Company. (401) 461-9922. **Write in 1458**



Tree protector

Tuff Bark is a durable plastic protector for young trees that easily interlocks to fit around the trunks of small- and medium-diameter young trees. It is available in gray or brown and comes in attractive, self-merchandising, 30-count boxes. Private labeling is available. Triad Fence Products. (888) 462-1937. **Write in 1474**




Garden tools

The unique, ergonomic design of the Easi-Grip Garden Tools helps prevent injury to the hand and wrist. The metal is 100-percent stainless steel, and the handles are non-latex soft-grip. Made in England, with a lifetime warranty. Available in two styles: Easi-Grip Trowel and Easi-Grip Cultivator. Dorothy Biddle. (570) 226-3239. **Write in 1460**



Rain gauge

These rain gauges feature a distinctive verdigris finish, a solid brass jointed stake and a glass-measuring vial marked in both inches and centimeters. Three styles are available: hummingbird, dragonfly and rooster with weather vane. All styles stand over 2 feet tall. Mark Feldstein and Associates, Inc. (800) 755-6504. **Write in 1462** 

ence by failing to work the way it was supposed to in the middle of a competitive event. Failure to perform could have meant the difference in an enjoyable experience or a disaster. Craftsmanship and performance were critical.

THE CUSTOMER

As a manufacturer, I think of our customers as people who shop for solutions, not gadgets. Durability and comfort are critical. They want to buy the best tool they can to get the task done, and they don't want to purchase that same tool again and again. So, striving to build a loyal customer following by providing the best quality product and backing it up with good service is important. Occasionally, a customer doesn't think our product lives up to our claims. We always replace the "offending" product and ask some questions: How were you using it, how long before the problem occurred, what do you think might make this better? These questions are not intended to give the customer the third degree, but to help us improve our product. Though we hate to hear that anyone might be dissatisfied, we turn it into an opportunity to improve.


Our company mission from the very beginning has been to provide products of the highest integrity and innovation. We strive to provide the utmost in function and fit. It's a sound model and can work for retailer

and manufacturer alike.

There are a few key elements in transforming the process of "defending your price point" into "building a foundation:"

- Select and/or develop products that are unique and easily identified as "quality."
- Surround yourself with a knowledgeable staff and vendors

who share the same values.

- Work consistently to build a reputation for quality and service.
- Guarantee your products even if the manufacturer doesn't — any time, any place, no questions asked.
- Use your guarantee as an opportunity to turn a bad experience into a positive one by guiding the customer to a better solution or a more knowledgeable approach. 
- Finally, ask a lot of questions and listen to the answers.

Beverly Schor is the owner and designer of San Francisco-based West County Gardener, dedicated to producing innovative, high-quality garden and work gloves for both weekend gardeners and professional landscapers. She may be reached by phone at (800) 475-0567.

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