

Strategies to



Train Consistently

By Pete Bottomley

In the last issue (see *Lawn & Garden Retailer*, July 2002), I defined real training as a long-term process that takes people through multiple learning steps, beginning at their first exposure to a new idea and continuing to mastery. Now it's time to get your garden center team training consistently!

Let's say you have an objective to implement a seamless customer service system between all of your garden center departments. For starters, you'll introduce the concept to your employees in an educational session so they can start thinking about it. This is where most training stops, but not this time. You have a plan to keep the training going until your new customer service system is integrated and maintained. You have a strategy to help your employees direct their own progress and a vision that your training program will create a unified team, enhance your company's culture and define your brand.

FOLLOW THE LEADERS

Ritz-Carlton Hotels, Southwest Airlines, Disney and Nordstrom's. What do these brands have in common? They all have outstanding people as the foundation of their success — people who train consistently in customer service and personal excellence. These companies have a serious training habit and invest millions of dollars in their employees, which has helped them rank highest in job satisfaction and lowest in employee turnover.

Here are the best training practices and implementation strategies used by great companies:

Set a rigid training schedule. Make training a no-excuses appointment. Garden centers in the *Lawn & Garden Retailer Training Challenge* meet every Tuesday, as do Ritz-Carlton hoteliers around the world.

Train in the morning. This is the best time to catch everyone before they start projects — when they can focus on learning. Keep in mind that you'll probably need to hold your training session before the store opens and pay your employees for their time.

Establish a 30-minute session. Research has shown that the average adult attention span is 20 minutes. A half hour is long enough to have an energizing meeting, share ideas and plan action items; yet it's short enough to keep everyone fully engaged.

Start and end as promised. Employees learn the value and importance of everyone's time. Starting promptly, even if some folks are missing, and ending on time underscores this fact.

Develop creative presentations. This keeps everyone on their toes and looking forward to the next meeting. Garden centers in the Training Challenge have danced, sung songs, produced sit-com parodies and even held an inter-departmental fashion show!

Make training positive. Avoid negativity and focus on positive reinforcement. Saying "we're doing this because you guys just don't get it" brands training in a negative light. Portraying training as a "chance for us all to learn from each other" connects the group.

Vary the presenters and turn learners into leaders. By asking employees to volunteer to present, the seminars become dynamic and interesting. Each individual brings unique skills and insights to the group. Employees who fear presenting gain confidence by teaching sessions to their peers, and the presenters invariably learn the most!

Teach people to think. Highlight this! Use problem-solving situations to encourage critical thinking and reinforce learning concepts. Thinking is the great energizer and will make your training sessions the foundation to a great future for everyone.

I've shared these strategies with you to take you one step closer to establishing a culture of learning in your company that will energize your employees and your business. It's important to keep in mind that it's the implementation of all the components that will make your training program reach its full potential. I urge you to start a training habit at your garden center and raise the performance and job satisfaction in our industry. 🌱

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CHALLENGE CALENDAR

6	Number of participating garden centers
85	Average number of employees trained per week
4	Opportunities to attend a Training Jam this year
August 20	Founders complete 24th consecutive week Dallas, Texas
September 10	New England Jam Nashua, N.H.
October 4	Truserv/Home & Garden Showplace Training Jam Dallas, Texas
Nov. 5	CNLA Training Jam Windsor, Conn.
June training topics:	"Avoiding Stress and Burnout," "Fertilizer Basics," "Plan a Field Day," and

One of the topics discussed by participating garden centers last month was merchandising. Usually, we think of merchandising as effectively displaying products so they will sell better – Vinny's Garden Center in E. Hartford, Conn., offers us a fantastic way to look at expanding merchandising themes using the five senses:

Sight – Let them see you smile. Don't clutter items.

Sound – Sound alive and excited. Others may hear you and get excited about your garden center.

Taste – Serve lemonade on a hot day; coffee on cold days; candy to keep kids happy while mom shops.

Smell – Use the wonderful fragrance of herbs and flowers.

Touch – Encourage customers to put on hats, try lotions, step into clogs, sit on benches.

As garden centers, we have a great opportunity to combine our products in creative ways to set ourselves apart from the other companies vying for our customers' time and money. These sensational ideas will help you dream up new ways to provide memorable shopping experiences for your customers.

Market. Schafer Nursery, Bellingham, Mass., walked through the garden center as a team and evaluated its

current displays from a customer's point of view. The team examined areas that encourage people to stop, look and buy and compared those to locations that aren't producing the same results. This exercise helped them see how merchandising is a key component in the sales plan.

Teamwork. We normally think of merchandising as how we present products for sale, but check out what Evelyn from Vinny's, E. Hartford, Conn., had to say to her group, "Thanks to all of you for 'merchandising' yourselves and making Vinny's a pleasant place to work!" This statement speaks to the fact that we all "merchandise" ourselves with our attitudes and body language – If everyone's smiling, the positive energy builds on itself and work is upbeat and fun.

Training. Saint Aubin Nursery, N. Eastham, Mass., evaluated its training sessions to date. The team filled out questionnaires and had the opportunity to express its thoughts about the sessions. The team members also took the opportunity to suggest what topics they would like to train on. Whenever you can gain consensus on future training topics, do it! People enjoy learning when they identify their own needs.

Systems. Vinny's in Wallingford, Conn., showed how