

The Overlooked Training Partner

By Jim Paluch

You have made the move and introduced the power of consistent in-house training into your organization and are already reaping the benefits. It may be that you have chosen the *Lawn & Garden Retailer Training Challenge* or have invested the time and energy to create your own process; regardless of the method, training is having an impact. If you are really serious about the training process you may have developed several partners to make it effective. You have partnered with key people in the company to instruct on those issues that they are best suited to teach; you have enlisted the help of the employees in role-playing and problem solving to enhance critical thinking and gained support of top management to budget the training; you may have even sought the help of outside vendors to instruct on specific topics. Even with all of this assistance from others, it is quite possible that you are overlooking one of the key partnerships to making your training successful, relevant and even prof-

itable. This potential partner is so important that it is the very reason you have decided to train. The partner being underutilized is your customer!

To gain an appreciation of the potential in partnering with your customers in training efforts, first consider their feelings toward your company and training. They are taking for granted that you are training. They just assume that the company they have chosen is professional and that the person they are dealing with is qualified to do so. Those that are rendering a service are expected to have the needed skills to render it. Observe your own actions when you walk into a barbershop or chiropractor's office. Look for the diploma or certificate to verify that at least one head of hair had been cut or back cracked! When the company mission statement talks about "exceeding customer expectations," isn't the company that is not training already falling short of the customers' expectations by not training. Customers expect your company to be trained, so do not let them down — get them involved.

THE MARKETING ADVANTAGE

Every customer has a choice of whom they will choose to perform a service. This is a great thing for the company that is training and knows how to use training as a marketing advantage. When positioned correctly with the customer, training will separate the company from the competition and cause the customer to narrow the choice to a company that does not train or one that is training. To begin your partnership, consider one or more of the following to enhance

this marketing advantage and your training efforts.

TELL IT

- Send a training schedule to your clients, and let them know what you will be training on this month.

- Send out a press release that you have joined the Training Challenge or have sent a number of employees to a qualified training program.

- In your customer surveys, state that the customer's input is essential to the design and continued improvement of your training curriculum.

- In your sales process, highlight your weekly training classes, on-site quality discussions or safety meetings.

SHOW IT

- Send an E-mail to the appropriate clients to tell them that a training crew will be on-site today or that their site has been chosen as a model site for quality standards and will be toured by new team members.

- Increase the partnership, and invite them to teach a training session for your team. It could be on customer service, client awareness or how a decision is made to choose nursery or garden center services.

- One of the most effective ways to show you are training is a good old-fashioned client forum. Invite several of your clients to be on a panel in front of your company, and ask questions of what they like best and least about your company. The results are amazing.

- Pretend to be them. Even though you are not directly showing the customer you are training, the results could be powerful. Employees at Skinner Nurseries, Jacksonville, Fla., spend a training

session a month walking through their nurseries, asking the question, "What would our customers think right now?" then discussing the employees' responses.

PROVE IT

- Send out press releases on successful certification of employees.

- Show pictures of company training in your presentation portfolios or PowerPoint.

- Certification patches as part of the uniforms stand out and show your training commitment.

- The best proof? Perform as a professional!

Just as every partner should bring something to the table, your customers will certainly add to your training efforts. As you heighten customer awareness and position training as your marketing advantage by telling, showing and proving, then "buyer confidence" will increase. The peace of mind that customers can have by knowing, not assuming, that their garden center is actively training and producing professional results is the customer's reward for being a training partner. Increased buyer confidence allows a company to achieve some of the goals of initiating training in the first place. Increased buyer confidence results in increased sales, increased prices and increased profitability. In partnering with your customers and getting them involved, the equation becomes simple; training equals profits. 🌱

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CHALLENGE CALENDAR

21 Participating garden centers

136 Average number of employees trained per week

August Training Topics:

"Summer Plant Care"

"Plan Fall Events"

"Water-Loving Plants"

"Hardy Mums"

"Fitness and Health"

"Inventory Reduction Brainstorm"

"Watering Properly"

ACTION ZONE:

GARDEN CENTERS IN TRAINING

Market. Sanford's Garden Center, Tiverton, R.I., talked about the "little hinges that swing big doors." It realized the importance of sending thank-you cards, saying the "little things," such as helping people put plant material in their cars, make a big difference.

Agway of Orleans and Dennis, Mass., had a guest speaker come in and teach employees about seven different personality types of difficult people and give them tips on how to best deal with those personality types. They had fun and laughed a lot and shared stories of difficult customers, drivers, etc. A session like this was needed at this time of year.

Vinny's Garden Center, Wallingford, Conn., held a training session on Developing Trust. Employees decided that words alone do not completely communicate their message, and their actions are equally important. They came up with some tools for developing trust: Nonverbal methods

are to smile and make contact. A good verbal way is to ask questions and then listen and pay attention to your customer's needs. A well-groomed physical appearance will also help to develop trust.

To train on dealing with difficult people, Spider Web Gardens, N.H., wrote out a few scenarios for its employees to listen to and then asked them what should happen next. They provided answers such as, "May I suggest a substitution?" or "What would you like me to do?" or "How can I make this right?"

Training. Kennedy's Country Gardens, Scituate, Mass., learned more about annuals by using a fun competition during training. Employees were asked questions that required a specific annual as the answer, then they had to find and bring back the right annual. The competition involved listening skills as well as knowledge.

Scott's Orchard and Nursery, Glastonbury, Conn., reported that

the cool, rainy weather conditions in the Northeast this spring have resulted in a lot of powdery mildew and fungal problems on plants and red thread in lawns. Employees looked at all of the products they have in stock to remedy these problems and discussed organic versus chemical solutions. They decided that if a customer calls in for them to diagnose a problem to have them bring in a sample in a baggie "to ensure a more accurate diagnosis."

Teamwork. Bayview Nurseries & Garden Center, Northfield, N.J., gave its employees an update on information, letting everyone know the season's schedule, the upcoming jobs, the flow of customers, etc.

Systems. Pleasant View Gardens, Loudon, N.J., trained on its procedures for spring shipping. Its customer service team was educated on the differences in shipping plant material during the spring compared to the winter, covering each step in the process: compiling orders into a

"master pull," assigning a team to pull the plant material from various greenhouses/locations, transporting them to the shipping building, consolidating plant material by individual order and finally, assigning the orders to a truck run.

Cost Control. Scott's Orchard & Nursery discussed its discount procedures during its training session. Customers have recently requested discounts when they purchase large quantities of an item. Employees were reminded that instead of giving them a discount; offer the customers a Preferred Customer Loyalty Card. For every \$30 the customer spends, their card gets one punch and after 10 punches, they receive a \$25 gift certificate good toward their next plant purchase.

Rewards. Kennedy's Country Gardens enjoyed training on herbs by making several dips and cooking other food with herbs and then people had to guess which herbs were in each dish. 