

# Relishing the Limelight



Armed with PR skills and creative, engaging merchandising, *Lawn & Garden Retailer's* newest Merchandiser of the Year had the chops to back up its Beaver Bark and take a bite out of the competition.

By Paige Worthy



After more than 15 years in business, Beaver Bark Gift and Garden Center got a much-deserved 15 minutes of fame in the local media as one of three finalists for *Lawn & Garden Retailer's* Merchandiser of the Year competition.

When Beaver Bark co-owner Renae Bobbett learned her store, located in Richland, Wash., had been chosen as one of the competition's finalists, she drafted a press release and sent it to area newspapers and television stations. Soon enough, stories were being generated and camera crews were on their way to get the merchandising phenom on tape. The coverage boosted awareness of the store and its finalist status, leading to a pre-holiday surge in votes through the magazine's website.

The influx of votes from customers, the Richland community and industry peers sealed Beaver Bark's victory in the end, but it was clever merchandising and a clear passion for the business that propelled them to the top.

## New Beginnings

Renae Bobbett and her husband, Todd, started Beaver Bark in 1992 as a bulk landscape material supplier. The business grew steadily, but after 12 years, they hit a bump: The state seized their land through eminent domain to build a new freeway, and Renae and Todd were forced to make a choice: close up shop, or start over on new property.

"It was the most stressful time in my 30 years of marriage," Renae says. "Someone was going to take everything we'd worked for. We had the rug ripped out from under us."

Having to find a new location and rebuild from scratch began as a curse

but became a blessing, she says. The whole family pitched in, and the store began its evolution to what it is today. "We got an opportunity to start all over with a beautiful building, proper lighting, amazing flooring and planned-out traffic flow. It makes merchandising and retailing so much easier."

And now, with the Bobbets' two children — Bryan, the company's 27-year-old vice president, and 25-year-old Amanda Kingham, VP of marketing — and their spouses involved in the store's daily operations, the business has expanded: Half the business is still bulk material such as mulch, compost, gravel and landscaping rocks, and the other half is traditional garden center fare, including the gift shop that earned Beaver Bark the title of Merchandiser of the Year.

## Creating Substance

The new location was a large, empty room with no internal merchandising skeleton — it's a great opportunity to be creative in the long run, but to start, four plain walls don't offer much in the way of display space. Renae enlisted the help of a local carpenter to build the little house in the middle of the store, and Myko Bocek, the store's newly hired merchandiser, was tasked with keeping it stocked with interesting seasonal merchandise.

This is one of her first jobs as a merchandiser, but Bocek's eye for design makes her a natural. "I've been into graphic design and art my whole life; I love home décor, and this was a perfect job for me," she says. Each season creates opportunities for new displays: a haunted house at Halloween, a cozy log cabin in the winter, a Southwestern scene spiked with prickly cact-





## MERCHANDISING

tuses (kids loved to explore the display with their hands — that's a mistake Bocek won't make again!) and even a beachy paradise with real sand. Often, Bocek will tie the little house's theme to a display of outdoor items near the entrance, which keeps customers interested throughout their visit.

Though it might seem that such an eye-catching central display might detract from the rest of the store's merchandise, Bocek says that's not the case. New customers get caught up in the cottage's charm, but they always want to see what else is there. "People love looking at the house, but they're also eager to look at the store."

### Making Connections

On top of Bocek's creative talent, Renae and Todd also gather merchandising ideas while traveling the country on garden center tours — Renae says Garden Centers of America's 2008 holiday tour in Philadelphia was her 14th. Finding ways to balance what they see while they're touring with merchandise that's best suited to their store's location has been essential. "It's an investment of time and money, but the return has always far outweighed any investment," Renae says.

And ideas aren't their only returns on investment: Renae and Todd leave each tour with industry friendships that Renae hopes will last a lifetime. And at least where the Merchandiser of the Year competition was concerned, those relationships — as well as relationships with their customers — paid off: Beaver Bark earned a record number of votes.

All the great merchandising in the world means nothing if you can't bring people in. Connecting on a personal level is crucial to Beaver Bark's success, and creating that experience is a real team effort: Everyone on the Beaver Bark staff, from ordering and pricing to merchandising and customer service, plays an important role. Thanks to their hard work, most of the store's "advertising" stems from word of mouth by happy customers. "The ambience gets people's emotions involved the moment they get out of their cars," Renae says. And that's what this business is really about: Getting customers engaged and helping them craft a lifestyle, not just a garden.

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