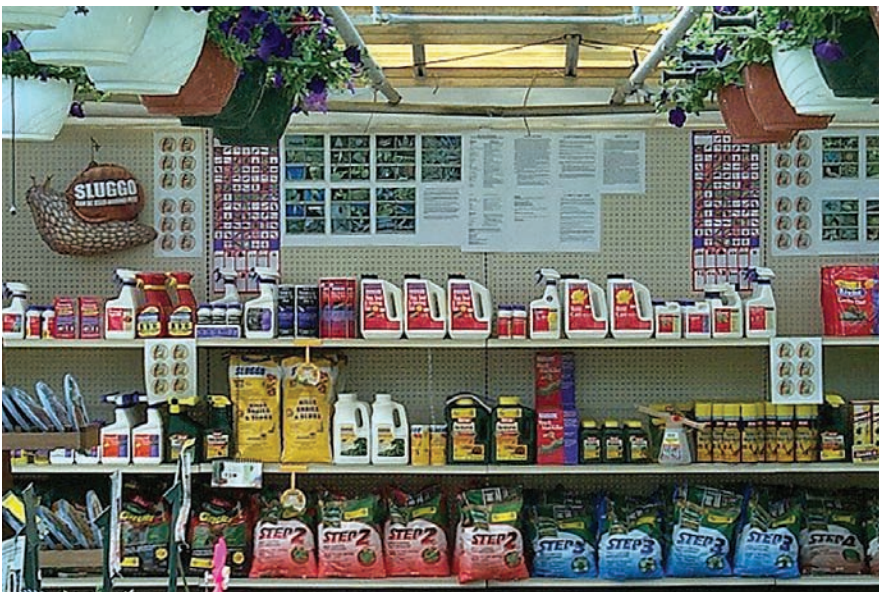


# Getting The Most Out Of Vendors And Trade Shows

Learn how to work with your product reps as well as shop the trade shows efficiently.

*By Emily Stefanski  
and James Gibson*



This is a well-organized garden chemical section with vendor information and promotional materials displayed above the chemicals. It is both helpful for customers deciding which products to purchase and for garden center employees to recommend which garden chemical will fit a customer's needs. (Photo: John Schwartz, Commerce Corporation)

One of the main reasons why a gardener shops an independent garden center (IGC) is the perception of a more knowledgeable and experienced staff along with a diverse inventory of high quality plants. This is true not only for green goods but also gardening accessories. To maintain this expectation, it is essential for garden center employees to be well versed in the product line.

It is just as important to be knowledgeable about how to successfully grow petunias as well as on which garden chemicals to recommend or how to maintain a fountain. This can be an overwhelming task if your product line is extensive; fortunately, your vendors are ready and able to provide assistance. Remember, you are your vendors' customer.

## Developing Rep Relationships

One way to enhance garden center resources is by developing rapport with your vendor representatives. Likely your representatives have a commission component to their salaries; so think of it as the "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" approach. The more support the rep can provide you, the more likely you will remain with the vendor and place orders.

Representatives have an array of knowledge and insight for your benefit. Find out from them what is selling, good buys and new product lines. As trade shows come

about, have your reps inform you about the hot buys and early order deals. Then throughout the season, get advice on how to promote slow-moving products, obtain promotional materials and gain product specifics.

This great resource is right at your fingertips; don't be afraid to take advantage of it. The more educated you are about your products, the more advice you can pass along to your customers and employees, and this equates to more successful sales.

## Beneficial Resources

So let's break it down: What resources can you expect from your vendors and their representatives? First, if your rep has been in the industry for a while, he or she should be able to answer technical questions, provide product testimonials and address industry trends. Be sure to pick your rep's brain about unfamiliar products.

For example, garden chemicals is an intimidating product line when it comes to selecting what to carry and which products to recommend to customers. Reps can be helpful about which chemicals to order and how much inventory you should carry. Plus, reps can provide information about upcoming garden chemical training days that are put on by the different chemical companies. This is usually a free event, and it would be useful to attend every couple of years to stay current on the different products. Also, this is a good continuing education opportunity for your



Take the time to browse through product catalogs with your representative. You will be able to get answers to your questions right away, find out the best and worst sellers, plus hear their recommendations on products that might work well for your store. (Photo: James Gibson)

employees on the retail floor, so they, too, will be able to confidently handle customer questions and provide recommendations.

Look to your vendors for promotional materials to accompany your products. Be sure to request items such as banners, pamphlets, factory coupons, shelving units and left-over promotional materials from trade shows. If you encounter a problem with any of your products, contact your representative immediately to resolve the issue. It may also be good to photograph any damaged, returned or weathered goods that might result in a credit.

During the busiest part of your sales season, try and have representatives of your most popular products visit you weekly. This way you can get updates on new products, hear about trends and find out about the in-style items. Also, reps are there to give advice about when and how much to reorder on merchandise that is selling. With seasonal products, like wild-flower seeds, there comes a point where you should just sell out rather than risk being stuck with leftover inventory that cannot be overwintered.

Check out product lines with guaranteed sales. This way you can sell the product for a certain length of time and then return unsold product. You are only charged for the product sold.

### Trade Show Attack

Have your reps come see you as soon as the show book for the trade show becomes available. This way you will have plenty of time to go through the show book with your current year's numbers to decide on preorders. The more you order at the show, the better

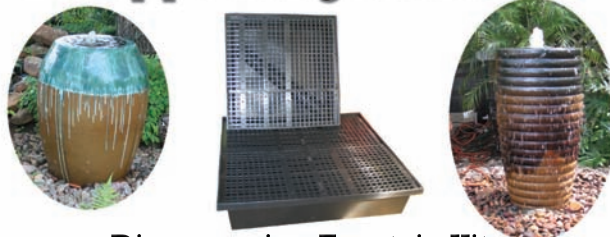
pricing you will get, which means higher margins. Additionally, if you come prepared with orders written ahead of time on items you plan on repeating, this will give you valuable time to concentrate on what is new at the show. Be

sure to observe the attendees to see what products are attracting the most attention.

As you prepare your buying plan for the year, remember to keep in mind that profit per square foot is still the best way to

improve turns and increase profitability. Some of the most progressive retailers do this every year. They will concentrate on new lines for endcapping and spot featuring, which will give them the most return for the space at hand. ▶

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Picking items the vendor is planning to have available at the warehouse will assure you will be able to reorder the item if it becomes popular. Sit down with your rep before the big show to look at the new lines, ones they

foresee being popular sellers for the season ahead. It will give you time to plan space and display ideas before actually committing.

Discuss and negotiate the best freight options at or before the trade show. If you have the space,

it might be beneficial to get the product in early to reduce freight charges. This is common with mulch and potting soil deliveries; the earlier you order and receive the bagged product, the better pricing and freight charges will



As you develop your buying plan, look for products that come with their own display unit. This will save time finding a place to display the product and get it on the retail floor sooner. Also, having the products on their own display rack will make it easier to keep track of inventory and to place reorders. (Photo: John Schwartz, Commerce Corporation)

be. Also, find out about payment dating options. If you are able to negotiate 90- or 120-day dating, you will have time to sell the product and then make the payment for it afterwards. This way you are not hit with a mound of bills before the gardening season even begins.

Developing this relationship with the vendor representatives will make buying, displaying and selling a lot simpler. Springtime is busy enough as it is, why not make it easy on yourself and look more into this convenient resource?

Your reps will be glad to work with you on better purchasing decisions and ways to promote the products. They are also there for you on product knowledge and support. Taking full advantage of your representatives means better sell through of merchandise while achieving high margins. Taking the time to listen to your reps will make for more confident buying decisions for the upcoming year.

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