

### WALKING THROUGH A **PROMOTIONAL** WONDERLAND

From when to start to what to sell — don't forget to consider the many aspects of an effective holiday promotion before entering the Christmas selling season.

By Meghan Boyer

**C**onsumers spend more for the winter holidays — Christmas, Hannukah and Kwanzaa — than any other holiday. In fact, with consumers spending roughly \$435 billion, holiday sales crush the nearest competition (back-to-school sales at approximately \$48 billion), according to the National Retail Federation. The numbers are high enough to incite a feeding frenzy among retailers, as each tries to grab a share of the sizable holiday market.

A way for garden centers to compete is by devising and implementing effective holiday promotions. But what makes a good promotion? There are a number of aspects — such as when to start promoting and what products to carry — that need to be considered before beginning.

#### Start Early

Long gone is the time of unveiling Christmas merchandise after Thanksgiving; increasingly, retailers are putting holiday decorations and goods on shelves even before Halloween. This means planning for the season — from designing and scheduling promotions to selecting the types of products to carry — needs to start early in the year.

Green View Nursery, Dunlap, Ill., is one of many garden centers that starts Christmas preparations in mid-October: "It used to be that people didn't start promoting until the day after Thanksgiving. It's so different now. In our showroom, we have our permanent trees starting to be set up as early as the end of September, and

in October our permanent theme trees are set up and decorated, so by the time it's November, everything is done and ready to go," explained Lisa Hoerr-Grandstaff, vice president of marketing at Green View.

In addition to setup, publicizing for the holiday season begins in late fall for many garden centers. "We send a direct-mail piece to our [loyalty program] club members in October to let them know about everything we have to offer for the holidays," said Hoerr-Grandstaff. The direct-mail piece informs customers about the assortment of products and events at Green View during the holiday season.

Before scheduling and advertising promotions, an important aspect to consider is the customer: Spend some time thinking about the target audience and how to attract it. "You have to think of the audience, who you are trying to appeal and whether it's an event or sale," said Hoerr-Grandstaff. For instance, if you would like to see a lot of families, schedule events that appeal to both adults and children. Or for a predominantly adult crowd, cater events to their tastes: informational seminars, live music, wine and cheese parties, etc. Also, be aware that people become increasingly busy as the holidays approach, which makes space at events scheduled too close to Christmas difficult to fill. The timing of a promotion can be integral to a successful event.

Some planning, such as choosing which products to carry, occurs well before the following Christmas. Buyers at Waterloo Gardens, Devon and Exton, Pa., choose which products to



This bear tree at Homestead Gardens was a unique attraction for consumers. (Photo courtesy of Homestead Gardens)

place in the store months before the next holiday season. Tim Schauer, director of marketing for Waterloo Gardens, said their buyers travel extensively throughout the year in search of products: "They'll be in Germany in about a month [after Christmas] to buy for the next season," he said. Just like when shopping for friends and family, shopping early and not rushing leaves more time to be choosy.

#### Stand Out

The Christmas retail season is different from any other time of year. One reason is there are many products to sell in a small window of time. Hoerr-Grandstaff noted: "You have November and December, basically, to sell a store full of merchandise and also offer your holiday services."

Competition is also fierce around the holidays, with all types of retailers vying for consumer attention. Schauer rates Waterloo Gardens' level of competition during the spring at a four (out of 10) and during Christmas at an

eight or nine. "We feel like we compete with every store, every movie theater and restaurant. There's a limited amount of money, so we promote a lot stronger, we discount more heavily and we have multiple promotions at any given time," he explained.

Advertising sales and promotions can help garden centers stand out and get a share of the consumer funds spent for the holidays. Tim Hamilton, marketing director of Homestead Gardens, Davidsonville, Md., describes Homestead as a public relations machine around Christmastime. "We have all of the events that are going on plus the advertising that's going full tilt at the same time. We do more advertising that time of year simultaneously than any other time," said Hamilton.

Homestead Gardens advertises internally with posters, flyers, handouts, and garden club E-mail blasts and externally with television, radio, magazine and newspaper ads. While radio, print and television ads can



work to attract new shoppers, informing garden club members or the most frequent shoppers about holiday events and products through direct mailings or E-mail blasts is a good way to remind an already-loyal group of shoppers that your garden center is a shopping destination during the holidays, too.

Further distinguish your garden center from the pack of holiday retailers by carrying uncommon Christmas products. Schauer feels the most important aspect of an effective holiday promotion is having the right products: "We really try and choose high-end, unique items that are special and you can't find in any big box." Similarly, Homestead Gardens' Christmas buyer tries to find imports and exclusives with which to stock the shelves. The products can be a differentiator, working to attract customers and separate a garden center from the retail crowd.

### Welcome The Season

A kickoff event at the beginning of the holiday season lets customers know your garden center is ready for the holidays: Hosting an open house, preview party or illumination brings customers to the store where they can get into the holiday spirit and see the products at the same time.

For many garden centers, the kickoff event is the largest promotion of the season. "Open house weekend is our big one," Hamilton

confirmed. He describes the event as being "elbow to elbow."

The basic schedule for the event is similar among garden centers: The Friday evening before the open house weekend, preferred customers are invited to an exclusive preview party, which is a nice way to thank them for their patronage. "We have wine and dessert...and light music, so it's a very nice evening. [The preview party] is our unveiling of the holiday season to our best customers," Hoerr-Grandstaff said. An open house for the general public then follows over the next two days.

Another way to welcome the season is by having an illumination. Basically, this is lighting the garden center and its surrounding area. Schauer explains: "We do an illumination on Black Friday. Both our locations have tens of thousands of lights, and Santa comes in a fire truck." Schauer estimates that each store has 1,000-1,200 people attending their respective illuminations. While beautiful to behold when finished, an illumination is a time-intensive event to prepare. Because there are so many lights to put up, Hamilton mentioned that Homestead Gardens' landscape team starts preparing for it in September.

Schauer noted that people make a tradition out of coming to Waterloo Gardens' illumination. No matter how the season is welcomed, make a tradition out of it. Soon customers will start to expect and look

### A Satellite Location

Gordon Elsbury, owner of Elsbury's Greenhouse, Hope, Ind., started reaching out to holiday customers in a unique way 4-5 years ago. His greenhouse is located in the country, roughly 10 miles from Columbus, Ind., which means many people aren't able to stop by the store during the holiday season. To remedy this, each Christmas season Elsbury's takes over a vacant location at a mall in a neighboring city.

At the mall location Elsbury's sells giftware, poinsettias and some houseplants. The retail mall sales end up about equaling those at the greenhouse, but Gordon feels the name recognition and exposure that comes from the satellite location is more valuable than the sales. "We all really feel like the bigger benefit of the whole deal is that so many people don't make it out here at Christmastime," he explained, "and we think it's worth a lot for just the advertising benefit and keeping our name in front of the public." Employees at the satellite store help to ensure this by distributing Elsbury's Greenhouse newsletters and directions to mall patrons so can they visit Elsbury's Greenhouse throughout the rest of the year.



Elsbury's temporary mall location helps promote the greenhouse and boost Christmas sales. (Photos courtesy of Elsbury's Greenhouses)

forward to initiating the season the same way each year.

### Add The Right Ingredients

Free glasses of cider and Christmas music are nice touches during the season, but alone they aren't likely to

attract consumers away from other shopping locals. Create a must-see location and a unique holiday experience for shoppers by layering interesting attractions among traditional touches. "We try to create an experience: You don't just come here to shop," said Hamilton. For example, ▶

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Layer interesting displays and attractions among traditional touches can create a must-see holiday location. (Photo courtesy of Homestead Gardens)

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during a past holiday season employees at Homestead Gardens set up a teddy-bear tree that was almost 20 feet tall. This element was in conjunction with other Christmas touches such as Santa, holiday music and a train set — elements Homestead Gardens brings in each year.

Employees at Green View Nursery incorporate seasonal goodwill into their holiday promotions. They invite not-for-profit organizations to be involved with some of their events in a variety of ways — everything from an adopt-a-pet event and welcoming charity volunteers at garden center promotions to holding silent auctions and having donation boxes. The fundraising is both a way to spread the spirit of the season and give back to the community. Hoerr-Grandstaff expressed her thoughts: “We strongly believe in finding ways to give back to the community. There are all sorts of ways to give back: monetarily, in kind or doing these events for charitable causes. Little things help, and it shows that you support your community.” Green View even incorporated Santa into the fundraising: Families were asked to make a suggested donation to the American Red Cross for each photograph they took with Santa.

But no matter what additional, interesting holiday ingredients are added, don't mess with the basics. “[There's] a fine line between offering consistency of expectations and offering something new so it doesn't get stale,” explained Hamilton. There's a lot of nostalgia associated with Christmas, and people have certain expectations they want met. Hamilton knows that customers don't show up solely because of the music or lights at

Homestead, but removing one or more of the traditional holiday elements will make them upset. “I think you're trying to create the whole atmospheric package of Christmas. You're trying to offer people a little piece of their childhood. Everyone romanticizes what their Christmas was growing up. There is a magical element to Christmas. We're trying to create that,” explained Hamilton. “Christmas seems to evoke the most emotional reaction from people, and that's something we're not at liberty to change.” In the end, the traditional touches are the foundation of holiday promotions; everything else — the unique attractions, fundraising, seminars and advertising — is built upon it.

### Watch The Bottom Line

Garden centers big and small need to keep in mind that great Christmas promotional ideas don't necessarily make great Christmas promotions. Ultimately, promotional events need to be profitable: A great idea that is expensive and only attracts a few buying customers isn't sustainable. Think promotions through, weigh the options and don't feel like you have to spend a lot to make a lot. 🌿

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