



Meghan Boyer

# What Looks Good To You?

Whatever a retailer is best known for — merchandising, customer service, atmosphere and more — certain stores stand out for their best practices. As a professional retailer, which ones do you admire? “Outside The Industry” will take a look at what some of these merchants are doing that you may want to try in your garden center.

## Let Us Know

There are a number of retailers that are quite good at certain things, be it merchandising, store organization, atmosphere, customer service and more. To help narrow the field and find the best examples, keep your eyes open: Look at their advertising, their promotions, their displays, their customer service, and then tell me what you think. I’m happy to investigate your large retailer questions, ideas and obsessions.

Send your thoughts and suggestions to [mboyer@sgcmail.com](mailto:mboyer@sgcmail.com). I look forward to hearing from you.

As you’re walking through the mall or driving down the street, which retail stores grab your attention? It might be a store’s window display, its advertisement on the side of a bus or another person carrying its branded bag full of newly purchased products. Whatever it is, you realize there is something there that makes that particular retailer stand out, something it is best known for that attracts attention and notoriety, and you wonder, “Does my store have a certain something like that?”

To help you add “a certain something” to your business, we have developed this new column — “Outside The Industry” — to point out what other large, non-big box merchants do well, from customer service techniques, to merchandising, to

atmosphere and more. These retail dissections will give you a better understanding about different merchants outside the green industry and keep abreast of their actions. Hopefully, it will also give you plenty of ideas to implement at your own business.

## Don’t Get Beat Up

Being an independent retailer does not necessitate harboring fear of the larger merchants, whether they sell books, technology, fashion or other products. While your store is competing for the same discretionary-income dollars from consumers, it is not directly competing to win in number of sales or profit or even breadth of products. A win for you in any of those categories against a big, national retailer is unlikely to happen. But even though you



When you go shopping, take a look at other retailers around you. What is attractive to consumers about their stores?

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When you are searching for window display ideas and see a great display, ask yourself, "What makes this successful, and what do I like about it?" Look at the window display not as one unit but as a sum of its parts.

won't win in a direct competition, you don't need to avoid or ignore the mass merchants altogether.

Think of them as retail's big brothers (not in the 1984 novel sense): The stereotypical big brother (or for some, big sister) will always be able to rough you up no matter how big you get, so there is little point in trying to bring him down. But while he may bully you from time to time, you shouldn't hide from him; there's a lot you can learn from just watching his actions. He's always the first to try out new experiences, to see what works and what doesn't. Likewise, he's also the first one to encounter failures and be rebuked.

By watching your big brothers (the large, outside-the-industry retailers), you can emulate their successes, avoid their failures and evade getting beat up — and ultimately find success of your own by borrowing and adapting the ideas that will fit your business and customers best.

### You've Got To Look

As an independent business owner, the large, national retailers might not be your favorite places to shop, but you won't regret looking to them for ideas and cues. Think about it: The bigger retailers can afford to hire teams of people to dream up new ideas, watch the trends and design new display con-

cepts. They have people at their corporate headquarters specializing in and handling all the different areas of retail, from product placement to human resources. In contrast, you have a very capable staff but realistically cannot devote the same amount of time, energy and money to cultivating new ideas and staying on the cutting edge of retail, which is why the ability to watch and "borrow" good ideas is so valuable for independent retailers like you.

Trend research in and of itself requires a tremendous amount of time and effort on the retailer's part. There are markets to watch, research studies to fund and trips to make in order to forecast what consumers will want in the coming seasons. Even though a large part of your business is selling plants, a rampant following of trends is as necessary for you as it is for the mass retailers, you just don't need to spend as much money as they do for it, which is why it is important to see what they are doing and borrow their research.

So keep an eye on the new colors and styles that saturate the larger retail stores each season and arrange your displays accordingly. It doesn't hurt to look, and it certainly doesn't hurt to get some free ideas for your store.

### Break It Up

Some in the industry may scoff at the idea of looking to large retailers ♦



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No matter if it sells clothes, electronics or cooking supplies, every mass retailer has good ideas that you can apply to your garden center.

for usable ideas and believe the concepts won't translate to independent garden centers. It is true that not everything large merchants do is applicable to garden centers: They operate on a very large scale and have plenty of money to put behind their projects and initiatives. It is also true their ideas don't need to be borrowed literally or entirely.

One of the goals of this column is to break apart what a retailer does well into many manageable pieces. Consider a merchant known for its elaborate window displays, such as Crate & Barrel or Pottery Barn: Each display is elaborate and brightly colored, including multiple products and, at times, custom-made pieces to display those products. How can you create such a display in your garden center?

Start by looking at the window display not as one unit (which is daunting) but as a sum of its parts (which is more manageable). When you are out searching for ideas and see a great display, ask yourself what makes it successful and what you like about it.

This hypothetical window display includes products placed on colored tiers at many different levels, which is visually pleasing. It has a window decal in front of the products and a poster hanging behind them, which adds depth. With each division of the display, the idea becomes easier to implement. You could choose to execute one, two or all aspects of the idea.

To create a similarly effective display in your garden center, you would only need to replicate the basic ideas of the large retailer's display. For instance, try placing a few complementary products in the window at varying heights, perhaps on crates of different sizes. Use fabric to add color and texture. Washable paint in the window and fabric or poster board hung behind the products will create depth. Your display, which you constructed with a little creativity for a lot less money, can achieve the same effects as the large retailer's.

### It's All About Perspective

Though they may be your annoying older brothers, the large retailers can also be considered tools for the growth and success of your business — it's all about how you look at them. With "Outside The Industry" appearing in each issue of *Lawn & Garden Retailer*, you will have another resource to use in making the mass merchants' ideas work for you. ☛

Meghan Boyer is associate editor of *Lawn & Garden Retailer*. She can be reached at [mboyer@sgcmail.com](mailto:mboyer@sgcmail.com) or (847) 391-1013.

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