

# Youth Appeal

Connect with the coveted younger generation by creating a space that draws them in with messages that resonate with them and an authentic, unique vibe.

By Adam Terese

A garden center trying too hard to project a certain image can feel much like interacting with a person trying too hard to fit a certain style: extremely uncomfortable. “If something is not authentic, people sense that and know it’s off — even if they don’t know why,” says Terri Coldreck, owner of Color Results, a garden center consultancy in West Kennebunk, Maine. “It’s the same with a business.”

For the younger generation, from around ages 18 to 34, a lack of authenticity can be a dealbreaker and a reason to flee. But a little merchandising and marketing know-how can transform an inauthentic, uncomfortable and stale shopping space into a place that “feeds the souls” of the younger generation, Coldreck says.

To be fair, most garden centers see their core customers as 40- to 60-year-old women with their own living spaces — a house, apartment or condominium — but marketing and merchandising efforts have increasingly been focused on the younger generation, says Christine Lucas of Hester and Zipperer, a garden center in Savannah, Ga. In April, for instance, Urban Outfitters’ Terrain at Styer’s home and garden store opened outside of Philadelphia, bringing the retailer’s contemporary customers and penchant for eclectic, individualistic products to the lawn and garden market.

After all, younger customers want to feel like individuals, Lucas says. But if you

## MERCHANDISING



approach marketing and merchandising the same way for the younger generation, customers will be repelled, not attracted. The principles may be similar, but where older generations focused on brand loyalty, shopped solely for the best product and were more apt to buy piece by piece instead of all at once, the younger generation wants style, shops for products that match their principles and prefers enjoying outdoor spaces, not creating them.

"It was the era of 'do it yourself'; now, it's the era of 'do it for me,'" Coldreck says.

### Do It For Me

Baby boomers may have enjoyed doing long-term projects with gardening and landscaping, but the younger generation would rather have an outdoor space instantaneously — they want it complete so they can get to using it, Coldreck says. That means merchandising should emphasize a final product by incorporating multiple items in an inspiring way. Instead of displaying a birdbath and a matching pot separately, pull them together and add a matching chair, she says.

"If you pull it together in an appealing way, the likelihood of them taking multiple items is greater,"

To cater to a generation focused heavily on living — not working — in their gardens, pair plant material with items that evoke a lifestyle setting.

she says. "If it's perfect, price even becomes less important."

### Keep It Authentic

Price can often be a factor in this generation's purchasing decisions. Because of that, they may not be wowed to the point of purchasing an entire display, so it's important to show how separate pieces can work to achieve a certain style, Lucas says. "They want it to be easy and functional to a certain extent," she says. "For the younger crowd, it's a more eclectic aesthetic." That appetite for the eclectic means younger customers should be shown how single pieces can work with what they already own. "You can show them how to

  
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use what they have with what they can afford to create a new look," she says.

Creative merchandising and unique colors can help give a garden center personality, too. The younger generation grew up surrounded by advertising and marketing messages, so a personality can help a garden center stick out from the clutter. "What's more powerful is shopping experience, a small-town feel for a business," Col-dreck says. "Would you rather spend your time looking at tile floors and cold metal shelving, or

would you rather walk into a place full of plants, colors and fountains?"

Marketing messages should also be unique, says Marta Maria Garcia, the marketing manager for Costa Farms in southern Florida. "It's all about customization for the younger generation, not stuff that is the same old things their parents are buying or doing," she says. To target younger customers, Costa Farms recently has been using colorful,

trendy tags to market a line of low-maintenance ferns called Fern Style. A piece of the fern acts as the hair for a cartoon-style picture of a person that appears on the tag. Each tag then represents a different hairstyle or personality, such as "Rasta" or "Bed Head," to give a contemporary, young and relevant spin to package design. This approach to marketing can be similarly applied to merchandising at garden centers, she says. For the younger generation, function and fashion must go together.





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### The Green Generation

Theresa Riley, an owner of Rockledge Gardens in Rockledge, Fla., says her garden center uses a more modern design with side-walks and signage to attract the younger generation, keeping things more “fresh and fun.” But she says that generation has been mostly interested in vegetable and fruit tree growing and environmental issues. Reflecting this, the popularity of all-natural fertilizers and pest controls has increased at her store. “The younger generation is less stuck in their ways; they’re easier to educate about these issues,” Riley says.

Mark Highland, the president of Organic Mechanics Soil, a potting soil company in West Chester, Pa., says the younger generation uses a “values-based system as opposed to a dollars-and-cents system” for buying products, meaning they are more concerned about companies’ policies and philosophy regarding the environment and sustainability, not just whether a product works. Additionally, garden centers “need to create a connection with the younger generation through a conversation,” Highland says. Act more like a friend who is eager to teach about landscaping and gardening.

To help attract the younger crowd and women, the company recently designed the packaging of its potting soil, using trendier colors and printing clear mes-

sages about its sustainable practices directly on the bags. After all, younger customers are more likely to buy from a company that matches their environmental values, so providing as much information as possible about the manufacturing of a product is a great way to attract them, Highland says.

Garden centers would be smart to capitalize on this environmental focus by making it clear through merchandising what is environmentally friendly, Lucas of Hester and Zipperer says. This type of merchandising, however, can work against a center with older customers because of the stigma that

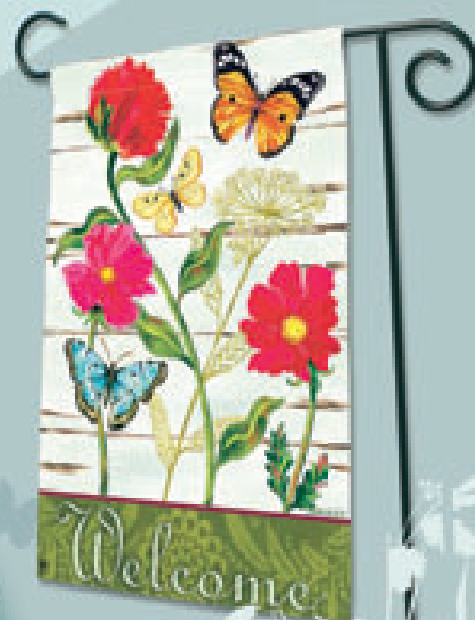
eco-friendly items are not as effective, she says.

A focus on eco-friendly can also help lure college-age consumers, who are generally looking for indoor plants to liven up a dorm room or apartment, Garcia says. The key is to angle marketing the green way. Garcia says Costa ♦

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Farms does this by emphasizing the aesthetic and health benefits of indoor plants. For one, indoor air pollution can be up to 10 times worse than outdoor pollution, according to the EPA, and a plant can help alleviate that. "These are the kids who will continue with it in their homes and apartments and

hopefully become avid gardeners," Garcia says.

#### Old Principles Still Apply

The younger generation may be different from others, but that doesn't mean the basic principles of marketing and merchandising have changed. "We don't have to

reinvent the wheel," says Color Results' Coldreck. Instead, merchandising just takes on greater importance. Part of that means buying products that fit a center's retail space. Proper buying helps reduce clutter in displays, Coldreck says. She also recommends keeping three or fewer different products



Playful signage and youthful merchandising concepts, such as Under A Foot Plant Company's Stepables brand, could do more to attract a generation that has always been inundated with marketing messages.

on endcaps — more than that can overwhelm a display. It also means reacting to what happens in your business. "Don't mark an underperforming product down 50 percent when there's no foot traffic in your store," she says.

Additionally, many baby boomers tend to do second careers and are either at retirement age or approaching it, she says. Because of this, that generation is now more interested in "do it for me" instead of "do it yourself," so merchandising in that way is becoming more significant. But it's not just merchandising that attracts the younger generation or really any age group; it's a combination of merchandising *and* customer service, says Lucas.

"If a customer can't solve whatever problem they're trying to solve, if they get lost in the creativity of your merchandising, it can work against you because people can be afraid to pull apart your display," she says. "Merchandising should be creative, but it needs to be shoppable, accessible and un intimidating, too." ■

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