

Features

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A Recipe for a Better Seasonal Workforce

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People don't do business with businesses; they do business with people. In your garden center, the people on the front lines talking with customers, getting them excited about plants, helping them make good choices and answering their questions, are—especially during the spring—most likely seasonal employees.

Make sure they're well equipped to convert browsing to buying and set new gardeners up for success. Train them.

Create Your Own Programs

I called Jeff Pilla, Retail Operations Director, and Karen Bachman Thull, Director of Marketing and Corporate Communications for Bachman's, a group of six floral, gift and garden centers in the Minnesota Twin Cities for their take on seasonal training.

"Wow me," I told her. "Funny you should use that word," Karen says, "Because that's what we use in all of our training and recruitment materials. It's infused in all of our core values and communication with customers."

Karen adds successful seasonal training starts with hiring the right seasonals. "These employees are ambassadors of our brand and we want them to have the same passion as year-round staff." She and Jeff explain that each of their six stores has a different vibe and relationship with its surrounding community.

"We start the hiring process in March. Each store is accountable for setting up and directing the training," says Jeff. Though they have many college students and Master Gardeners as part of their staff, "we truly focus on hiring individuals for personality because we can train the procedures," Jeff says.

Bachman's has an extensive training program for seasonals that runs for four weeks. "Each week, we train the most recent new hires. The main store will train 100 seasonal employees each year," he says. "Each employee undergoes about 16 hours of training. We have the program broken up into segments based on the individual's position, in addition to going over the overall tenants of our business and how that relates to interacting with fellow employees and our customers."

They include interactive workshops and classroom work. “We do a scavenger hunt that employees work together to complete.” Once the employees are trained initially, they keep current with ongoing learning opportunities throughout the season.

Using Resources from Vendors

Why reinvent the wheel? Ask your vendors what’s available that you can build on.

Proven Winners has a certification program for garden centers carrying their products. Staff members watch an hour-long video with information, photos, highlights and ideas featuring new introductions and popular plants from the Proven Winners annuals, perennials and shrubs lines. The video is conversational in tone and details marketing plans in addition to plant information. That helps garden center employees know what customers might be looking for when they visit.

After watching the video, employees take a test. Sandy Wentworth, Customer Relations for Proven Winners, says, “Ninety-eight percent of people who are certified would recommend the program to others. In 2016, 1,249 employees became certified.” Certified garden centers also receive the benefit of a higher listing in the directory on the Proven Winners website. Bailey Nursery is launching a new training program this year as well.

Don’t Stop When the Season Starts

Bachman’s started a new program last year that they call “Training in a Box.”

“Each week we assign a small item that all employees are required to read and process. It’s a mini step-by-step workshop,” Karen says. “Our team members came up with the idea. Products change and vary. This provides an easy way for staff to become engaged and work as a team to keep learning.”

Maria Zampini, a garden industry consultant and former manager of Lake County Nursery in Ohio, says she would recommend having employees download and install the “Armitage’s Greatest Annuals & Perennials” app on their phones. (It includes shrubs, veggies and other plants, as well. As a bonus, garden centers can list themselves for free on the app.) “The info is right there to help them learn and answer questions more intelligently!”

She continues: “I would put big dry erase boards in the lunch room and would post upcoming ads, the schedule for when new product was arriving and weekly feature about a new product so people could read about it during lunch.” She’d also put binders with product sheets in the lunch room. “Not everyone looked at them, but if even 10% did because they were bored while they were eating lunch, it was worth it.”

Reward Success

Proven Winners offers a pizza party to staff at garden centers completing their certification program in the spring. “We started offering it last year,” Sandy says, “And the feedback was so great that we’re doing it again this year.” There are also rewards for individual employees who become certified.

Karen says a key to Bachman’s success is “paying attention and providing recognition where recognition is due.” Hiring and training focuses on encouraging seasonal or temporary employees to be as passionate as

the full-time staff about products, services and plants. Within each location there's a "Wall of Wow," where individuals can recognize each other and compliment coworkers for helpful actions and activities. "It's fun because it allows everyone to share his or her own perspective about how others are WOWing customers."

Seasonal doesn't have to mean "one off." Maria encouraged staff—including seasonals who came back year after year—to secure certifications, take classes or earn a degree.

"Ohio has the Ohio Certified Nursery Technician program with several categories, one of which is retail. Some people offer a raise if employees take and pass the course."

Seasonal also doesn't have to mean "expendable." With the right training and encouragement, temporary staff can have a lasting effect on the bottom line.

Tips From a Seasonal Worker

Jo Ellen Meyers Sharp is a journalist, garden writer, editor and a seasonal employee at Sullivan Hardware & Garden in Indianapolis, Indiana. This spring, she'll enjoy her 18th season helping customers navigate acres worth of annuals, perennials and woody plants at the company's flagship location. She offers this advice to steal and share with your newbies.

- Don't be afraid to pull the plant tag from the pot to read and share w/the consumer. A lot of times, the tags have basic info that can start the conversation about what the consumer needs or wants.
- Sometimes the consumer doesn't know what she wants other than, say, a blue plant. Don't be afraid to ask questions like, "How will the plant be used?" "Do you want it to come back every year or just be there for the summer?"
- If you don't know the answer to a question, find another staffer who does. If no one is there, take the customer's name and phone number or email, say you'll get back with them and then DO.

About the four-part HR Series

Next month, we'll take a deep dive into conflict management and resolution in the last of our four-part HR series. In case you missed it, Ellen C. Wells gave readers resources for [assisting in the HR process](#) in the January issue and we took a look at [spring hiring](#) in the February *Green Profit*. **GP**

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