

Features

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Reeling In the Non-Gardeners

Ellen C. Wells

We've got gardening customers. We've got the guy who comes in for lawn care products four times a year, his Weekend Warrior wife who tackles a different planting project each weekend and the couple who wants to bring "eat locally" as close to their kitchen as possible. They all come to you because you've demonstrated your expertise each time they visit. They know that you know what you're talking about.

But what about those non-gardening customers? There are more of them out there than gardening types, after all. Wouldn't you want the chance to prove your worth to them, and maybe get a shot at some of their disposable income in the process? Sure, you would!

The question is how. And that is the question we presented to our three 2018 *Green Profit*/Dümmen Orange Young Retailer Award finalists. Interestingly, our 35-and-under garden retailers each presented a different solution. Amanda Bruce of Cedar Rim Nursery has opted for adding fashion, boosting social media and showing everyone what they've got via television ads. Brian Stankevich explains that at Homewood Nursery & Garden Center, promotional coupons and word-of-mouth recommendations get non-gardeners in and enjoyable experiences at the garden center keep them coming back. For Matt Webster, Dambly's Garden Center's focus on homesteading—from advertising to the right products to workshops on how to do it successfully—helps bring in those new gardeners interested in the topic. Oh, and a Santa-themed incentive works well, too!

Without further ado, let's read what Amanda, Brian and Matt have to say on the topic. Chances are you'll say to yourself, "Ah, I like that idea!"

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Meet the 2018 Judges:

Bill Calkins—Business Manager for Independent Garden Centers, Ball Horticultural Company

Andrea Snelgrove—Gift Shop and Merchandising Manager for Wingard's Market and 2017 Young Retailer Award winner

Bill McCurry—*Green Profit* columnist and owner of McCurry Associates consulting firm

Kate Terrell—Store Manager of Wallace's Garden Center (and a former YRA nominee!)

Question:

It's easy when customers come in your store looking for plants. But what strategies do you use to get non-customers excited about plants enough to venture into your shop so you can convert them into customers?



AMANDA BRUCE

AGE: 30

TITLE: General Manager

OPERATION: Cedar Rim Nursery, Langley, British Columbia

Getting non-gardeners excited about plants is something that all garden centers struggle with. It is something we work at continuously at our store, as Cedar Rim Nursery is known for our extensive plant selection. Green goods account for more than 85% of our sales and we are very proud of the fact that we are the largest garden center in British Columbia, with more than 10 acres of retail plant selection.

We find it fairly easy to attract those interested in gardening as they visit us for this plant selection; the challenge for us is attracting those who are intimidated and new to gardening.

We have tried to bring in non-gardeners several different ways. The biggest and most prominent way is expanding our product assortment. We started experimenting in fashion two years ago as an “add on” sale and it has grown exponentially for us. When you talk to most customers shopping in this area you find they are new customers who had no idea that we sold fashion, but were told to check it out by a friend. As you watch these customers wander through the store they start in the fashion section and then eventually end up in the nursery, most leaving with a plant or two. Our next challenge was getting these “black thumbs” to have success with their green goods, so we decided to dive heavily into the Proven Winners line of plant material. With all these shrubs, perennials and annuals being so easy to grow and requiring very little maintenance we started to fill our store with them. They also have the added benefit of an extensive media presence and are a name that customers are recognizing, even if they aren’t gardeners. It’s really exciting when you have one of these customers return and tell you how wonderful their plant is doing.

Another strategy we have used is improving and strengthening our social media presence. We have hired a 19-year-old (who has little interest in plants) to run our social media and she has been doing a fantastic job. She knows what is trending on sites such as Pinterest and she has been on top of pushing them in our store. She posts what she finds interesting or cool, not necessarily what we as garden center folk do, and it is amazing how many new followers we have gained. She boosts the posts on the new “it” items and we find our sales for these items skyrocketing. The cashiers are trained to track whether these are new or repeat customers and we are finding the majority of them are new.

We have also moved away from print ads to TV commercials. We wanted to show customers what our store looks like and that it is so much more than plants; we are a lifestyle center. The commercial is only 15 seconds but customers get a bird’s eye view of how large our facility is and it shows them the diverse nature of the products we carry.

Another avenue we are really encouraging is the ever-expanding and still popular edible gardening phenomenon. This is typically appealing to Millennials, many with children who want control over the food they eat. We run many

free seminars and workshops on fruit trees, sustainable gardening and so on to create awareness about how easy it is to grow your own food. We have seen a migration of customers from this genre to the landscaping side. As they have success with the edibles they begin to realize that gardening is not only fun but also a great stress relief in the urban jungle many of our customers reside in.

We have also started to focus on educating and exciting the younger generations about gardening. We run a strong children's program with classes every other weekend at the garden center. When we started these workshops seven years ago we noticed at first it was mainly grandparents (who were already knowledgeable about plants) bringing their grandkids, but that has started to change. It is many of the same children but now their parents are bringing them. We found the kids got excited and had fun at the workshops and would ask their parents to come more often. Now we find we are educating the parents just as much as the kids. We find the families come in for the workshop but end up staying long after it has finished and always leave purchasing a plant or two.

Each year we hold a Ladies' Evening and fashion show and last year we decided to "model" some of our favorite plant picks for fall. We had four of our male staff members strut the runway with a plant each and the ladies went crazy. It was a simple way to tie our green goods into the evening, and encouraging these ladies who came for fashion to try a shrub or two. The idea worked as sales for these shrubs skyrocketed.

Engaging new gardeners will forever be a challenge in our technologically obsessed society, where most children are growing up without yards, let alone gardens. But we feel as long as we continue to keep up with new trends and continue to educate the younger generations we will see more and more people getting excited about plants. Our goal is to stay relevant to an increasingly diverse group of customers who may not be from a gardening background.



BRIAN STANKEVICH

AGE: 23

TITLE: Assistant to the Managers

OPERATION: Homewood Nursery & Garden Center, Raleigh, North Carolina

In hopes of promoting better health many people are seeking to bring the beauty of the outdoors into their homes, causing the horticulture industry to become an important part of peoples' lives across all generations. However, the questions of where to purchase and obtain these plants are ones many individuals find themselves asking. The difference between a potential customer going to a box store

or to our garden center, Homewood Nursery and Garden Center, is the overall experience and knowledge our company provides. With highly knowledgeable and experienced employees, we are able to accurately answer all of our customers' plant questions and provide solutions to any planting issues they may have or encounter. Furthermore, we offer hands-on classes with trained professionals as well as seminars in order to further their horticultural knowledge. Through our hands-on classes, seminars and interactions with our customers, we encourage people to explore their creativity and then soar with it while creating their own gardens. When planning a landscape or garden, many people may find it overwhelming to determine where and how to begin. In these cases, our professional staff is able to provide accurate and helpful guidance. Others may find caring for their plants harder than they had first anticipated or are unaware of the health benefits plants help to provide in their living and workplace environments.

To begin, I find one of the most effective marketing tools to be word of mouth and personal recommendations. Therefore at Homewood Nursery, a customer's experience is vital to our success. If a customer can leave feeling satisfied, taken care of and having enjoyed their time at our company then our hope is they will then go and tell

others. I know regular customers that come in a few times a week because they call us their “happy place.” Many enjoy walking around and being inspired by our beautifully designed displays and getting ideas for their landscapes. For these reasons, many customers return regularly with their friends and family, and this is one way we bring in new customers.

Another effective marketing tool is advertising through the use of promotional coupons. For example, all new homeowners in our city’s area receive a coupon upon their move-in day. This provides an incentive for them to come out and buy plants for their new home while providing us with the opportunity to let them experience our creative environment. Another strategy we use is to send out mass coupons to the areas where we do not typically see large amounts of traffic from. This is usually done by ZIP code and provides new potential customers to bring in greater numbers of regular buyers.

In summary, while all of these methods are vital to success, knowledge remains the main key of marketing in the horticultural retail business. Without it, we wouldn’t be any different than any box store that sells plants. It’s not difficult to buy in plants to the nursery; the challenging part is to explain to the customer why a plant would be best suited for the area they want to plant it. All of these aspects plus our highly knowledgeable staff are what make us stand apart from places like Home Depot or Lowe’s. In addition, we provide anyone that walks through our door with a helping hand and a smile on our face. With the mentality and goal to provide every customer with a knowledgeable staff member and the highest quality products, any retail business will prove to be successful. Homewood Nursery and Garden Center is a prime example of how word of mouth, advertising, overall experience and knowledge are the best marketing tools to use in order to thrive as a business in a difficult industry.



MATT WEBSTER

AGE: 33

TITLE: General Manager

OPERATION: Dambly’s Garden Center, Berlin, New Jersey

Now is the perfect time to be excited about working in the plant industry! With an improving economy, a nationwide interest in knowing what we put in our bodies, and small-space and indoor gardening trending up year after year, we have an opportunity to provide people with a great selection of edibles, houseplants, miniature plants and plants that simply make them feel good! Few things are more frustrating than talking to people within the industry that have a negative viewpoint on where independent garden centers are going. It’s like some of us are ready to throw in the towel because what worked 10 or 20 years ago isn’t working anymore. The truth is, we must be willing to change and try new things, and the one way to capture people (who) haven’t been in our stores is by separating ourselves from the competition and letting people know that they ARE capable and we can help them succeed. Whether they want to start growing their own food, plant a garden specifically to attract butterflies or birds or just want to beautify their property, we need to find ways to connect with them and give them the knowledge and confidence to take action.

Over the last few years we have heavily emphasized our advertising (both print and digitally through billboards, website and social media) on what we have unofficially termed “homesteading.” We are showing people that they ARE capable of living more sustainably right in their own backyards and houses! We have focused on edible gardening, raising chickens and indoor gardening in our campaign, and have seen tremendous success, gaining hundreds of new customers from a very wide radius, all because of committing—week after week—to advertise focusing on these trending categories, and following through with consistently providing a thorough line of plants and essential products to make sure our new and old customers are successful. We don’t just stop at promoting our

product lines, we promote and hold classes and seminars that teach our customers where to start and how to be successful in their projects. We have had classes on raising chickens, hydroponics, designing and constructing planters—and that is just the beginning. We will continue to prioritize educating ourselves, and passing that knowledge onto the consumer. I personally believe that a key reason why our advertising produces real customers is that when people call, message or visit us, we backup our claims with both an exceptional selection of plants and products and a knowledgeable, helpful, patient, willing team.

Another way we have successfully brought in “non customers” is through an incentive program we launched a few years ago during the Christmas season. During this time we have a very popular Santa on the weekends. Families come back year after year to visit with him, but many of these people are not year-round customers. We began an incentive program where we give families that visit Santa a gift card to be used in the spring. We have seen a great percentage (about 50%!) of these families return months after Christmas!

One of the truly great things about running an independent garden center is that we have the opportunity and privilege of getting to know our customers—both loyal and new—and hear from them what it is they care about, their gardening goals and what they need from us to be successful. If we can continue to make them successful, we will be, too. **GP**