

Features

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Changing with the Times

Diana Stoll



Exciting changes are happening at Hicks Nurseries and Vincent Scavone is leading the transformation. Vincent wasn't actively looking for a new job, but when he was approached about an opportunity at an upscale garden center on Long Island, the possibility intrigued him. After conversations with the leaders at Hicks Nurseries, he knew the position of Retail General Manager of the 165-year-old garden center would be the next chapter of his career.

Pictured: Vincent Scavone, who has extensive retail experience at large operations like Target, took over as

Retail General Manager of Hicks Nurseries this spring, as the company began work on revamping replenishment logistics and customer service initiatives.

Vincent's 30 years of retail experience comes from outside the horticulture industry and he's putting his background of leadership positions in department stores, big box stores and specialty retail to good use. He credits his years at Target and its process-driven environment for replenishment that's helped him improve the shopping experience at Hicks Nurseries.

"Having the right product on the floor at the right time is so key to our business," he asserts.

Getting Faster Behind the Scenes

Construction of an inventory-processing center demonstrates the commitment Hicks Nurseries has made to the faster replenishment philosophy. An expanded loading dock will facilitate faster unloading and processing times. The new warehouse will provide needed space to increase the efficiency of checking in and tagging merchandise, so it can get on the floor as quickly as possible. The added space will also improve the process for storing backstock and replenishment. Vincent believes this addition will "ensure our floor is full at the right time, leading to a great shopping experience."

Vincent credits his experience at The Container Store for learning how to work with customers on entire projects. Asking the right questions about their complete organization goals and learning what customers wanted their homes to look like ensured staff could help them create the entire project.

"We have the same opportunity here," Vincent says. "However, we are asking about the outside of their houses."

What don't they like, what do they want their gardens to look like. In both situations, our sales teams are the experts and our customers love that we are providing that service."

Showing and Telling

In the planning process since 2013, Hicks Nurseries broke ground in July for a new Landscape Inspiration Center, where landscape designers and clients can meet, and will include an area filled with landscaping ideas. It's scheduled to be completed by Labor Day.

Also incorporated in the improvement project are 13 display gardens in the nursery department—each garden with a different theme. Whether a customer is interested in creating a formal landscape, a Zen garden or a space for birds and butterflies, the gardens are meant to inspire ideas and increase sales.

Paving dirt walkways and improving the flow with better signage are also part of the project.

"The goal is to help our customers find what they need, from a basic plant to a full-on landscape design," Vincent says. "It's going to be a wonderful shopping experience for our customers."

Setting Employees Up for Success

In my opinion, the best managers fully appreciate the value of their staff and Vincent seems to agree.

"It may sound like a cliché, but I love our team," he says, "They have been so wonderful with my transition to Hicks."

Vincent is a firm believer that managers should remove obstacles standing in the way of success of staff members. One of the first changes he made at Hicks was revamping the structure of the store's management team. Instead of a "manager on duty" for the entire day, Vincent established three separate shifts for managers to lead the business through the day. The focus of each shift manager is based on the time of day.

A "task manager" opens the store and makes sure Hicks is ready for business, tasks for the day are being completed and merchandising routines are being followed. A "service manager" takes over at 11:00 a.m. to ensure projects are completed, the merchandising team has the store full and customers are receiving the best possible service. The "closing manager" continues to focus on customer service so that customers shopping at 4:00 p.m. receive the same experience as those shopping at 1:00 p.m. He also makes sure the store is still full and clean.



Communicating What Matters

Communication with staff is also important to Vincent. "I stay connected with the team by being on the floor with them. I like to answer questions in the moment, share perspective on how our goals are being met or if there are opportunities that we need to address."

Pictured: Retail GM Vincent Scavone stands in front of the new construction at Hicks Nurseries, a Landscape Inspiration Center, which will have landscape ideas nearby and complement 13 themed display gardens in the nursery department.

Vincent also meets every Monday with managers to review sales, plan future projects, discuss merchandising plans for the week and celebrate customer service wins and opportunities. Classes, called Fact Forums, keep the team current on information needed to assist customers. They're held monthly and highlight current trends or topics that help them respond to their customers' requests.

I asked Vincent what made him most excited about the future of Hicks Nurseries. He responded, "What's not to be excited about? We have been helping customers with their gardening needs for 165 years and there is never a dull moment. From beautiful plants and flowers to our wonderful new customer-friendly nursery and our amazing team, every day is exciting at Hicks Nurseries. I look forward to continuing to learn about our industry while utilizing my professional experience as we move forward with our new initiatives." **GP**

Diana Stoll worked for 20 years in a garden center, 12 of which were as a manager. She's now a freelance writer who writes a weekly gardening column for the Chicago Daily Herald and for a variety of other garden and news publications. Read her blog at www.gardenwithdiana.com and email her at diana@gardenwithdiana.com.