

Departments

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Revitalizing Retail

Catherine Evans

The Macy's Debacle: Maybe Not

A few years back, when the department store chain Macy's bought out Federated Department Stores, they became the new owner of Chicago's famous Marshall Field's. After more than a yearlong battle with loyal Field's fans, the stores were renamed Macy's. Since then, most of the Macy's stores in the Chicagoland area (especially the State Street store) have been struggling because people were so unhappy about the name change and won't shop there. Until this past weekend, I was proud to say that I was one of those people.

So when my mother, aunt and I went shopping at Macy's over the Christmas season, I wasn't excited about it at all ... that is, until we got there. Right off the bat, the extravagant holiday decorations caught my eye. The decorating was top notch, with humungous hanging glittery ornaments, garland, lights and so much more. Everything was so big it was like you were in a giant's living room waiting for all of the extra-large presents to be opened. You saw more people looking up at the decorations than at the merchandise. All in all, my first impression was pretty good (as a customer's should be).

Then came the customer service. Despite the packed aisles, there was a Macy's employee about every 10 feet in all directions, equipped with walkie-talkies and ready and willing to help. They were directing traffic, answering questions, helping anyone who needed it, and doing it all with a smile and a thank you.

Next were the activities. Now, be honest—what kid wants to be dragged around a crowded store during the holiday season with their parents? None. So, Macy's decided to make the children's department much more fun, with children's book authors doing readings and signings, kids' craft areas, face painting, an indoor playground and a magician. There were more laughing and happy kids in a department store than I've ever seen.

For the parents, there were cooking demos going on in cookware, local vendors were allowed to come in and sell their merchandise, a Holiday Traditions Tour through the store, and more.

For a retailer that usually makes me unhappy to even talk about, Macy's really made an impression on me this holiday season. It seems like they're trying hard to develop activities for kids of all ages and bring that old Marshall Field's feeling back to Chicago. Actually, there was a recent report that came out saying that Macy's did have big plans for the holidays to try and bring back the old clientele to the store. Well, so far so good.

To follow up on the Macy's services, we got this message from a retail garden center owner:

My fiancé and I went shopping in downtown Chicago also. While in the Apple store I had a slight rage of jealousy. I

looked around the packed store and saw tons of people in every age, race, color, sex and so on. Their demographic is everyone.

I also stood in a corner on the second floor and tried to count the number of employees. From my spot in the corner I could count 29 employees in red shirts, and none of those were at a register. Holy customer service, Batman!

I was impressed, and yes, we spent several hundred dollars there that day.

—Kate Nelson

Wallace Garden Center

Davenport, Iowa

Merchandising on a Budget

Within the last two years, Platt Hill Nursery in Carpentersville, Illinois, has gone through a major renovation, which included knocking down a large greenhouse and replacing it with a brand new retail building. The structure not only took over that greenhouse space but an entire front outside sales area, as well. The renovation took Platt Hill from just greenhouses with an outside sales area to a large spacious retail building with attached greenhouses, plus freestanding hoop houses and the outside sales area, giving the garden center more of an upscale look.

Back when the greenhouse was the major retail area, it also served as the gift department. We all know how hard it is to have a gift department in a greenhouse (dirt, sun damage, temperature and so on), so you can imagine the challenges they had. To solve the problem, general manager Shirlee Stanchina and her staff collected a bunch of large, old, wooden planks, barn boards, trellises, arbors and other rustic wooden artifacts and used them to create “rooms” throughout the store. These walls and such helped keep the sun and wind off the gift merchandise, helping prevent damage. It also helped create a defined gift area separate from the plants, garden accessories, soil, fertilizer and other more “outdoor” products. As an added touch, each season they paint some of the pieces to match current trends and themes.

Although they have the new retail building, they still use this merchandising trick. The new building also has high ceilings, as does the greenhouse, so these walls and rooms bring the height down to the customer’s level. This allows them to shop from room to room and purchase whatever merchandise fits a room or area similar to their homes.

Platt Hill’s staff changes the rooms for every major season—spring, Easter, summer, fall and the holidays. Just imagine, a few buckets of colorful paint and a few hours of your employees’ time and you have a brand new display. Now that’s merchandising on a budget!

No Snow for this Snowman

In a recent issue of our weekly e-newsletter BuZZ! we asked readers, What new and innovative ideas are you trying for this holiday season? How are customers and staff reacting to it? Here’s what one of you had to say:

Just thought you would like to see the creativity of one of our growers, Cheryl Hopkins from Knollwood Garden Center. We had some extra Diamond Frost euphorbia, which we were using for our Diamond Points (poinsettia and Diamond Frost grown together) for Christmas. Steve Hopkins, our head grower (and Cheryl’s husband), asked her

to do something with the extra plants. Cheryl has quite a talent, don't you think?

—Kyle Knight

Knollwood Garden Center

Beavercreek, Ohio

100 Years and Still Growing

In December, we had the privilege of attending the holiday open house at West End Florist and Garden Center in Evanston, Illinois, which in 2008 will be celebrating 100 years of business. If you can imagine an old-time garden center with no gift shop, just a small mom-and-pop nursery with greenhouses filled with wonderful plants, well, this is that place.

This garden center is in a very ritzy part of the Chicago suburbs, which means there are a lot of snowbirds who leave the area during the winter. One of the cool things West End does for these traveling customers is store their prized houseplants for them for the winter. Not just a few here and there, either—they have an entire back section of the greenhouse that's just homeowners' plants. In most of these situations, West End goes to the customers' home, picks up the plants and cares for them until the owners return from their winter getaways.

The owner, Elizabeth Hoffman, told us a great story about a collection of begonias they get in every year. The owner is a woman who's had those begonias for 60 years and cherishes them as if they were her children. The reason they're so special to her is because when she met her husband 60 years earlier, those were the first plants he ever gave her (there was some debate as to whether it was on their first date or not). She keeps them going and brings them to West End every year because she knows they'll get the best of care.

Turning Lemons into Lemonade

Let's face it, the weather and this industry really do depend on each other. Sometimes weather works in our favor and sometimes it doesn't. In a recent BuZZ! we asked, What's your disaster plan? What kinds of procedures do you have in place at your garden center for dealing with any sort of disaster (natural or otherwise), should one occur? One reader's reply may start off a little scary, but it turned out to be a quite a fun and interesting idea.

Our most recent Meadow View "disaster" was early this past spring. A drain was clogged by a local wholesale nursery nearby, which in turn sent the water over the road to us. Our greenhouses sit below street level. The majority of our greenhouses were under water, along with our offices. The parking lot was almost impassable ... and I had just brought up our first big batch of pansy flats for early spring sales! How do you coax people into flooded terrain to buy pansies? We thought on our feet, and while the maintenance crew started the process of drying us out, the retail crew went to work. Who knew the old rowboat out at the back pond would come in so handy in our marketing adventure? We literally hopped in the boat, floated it to the front parking lot and filled it with flats of colorful pansies. We called it our "Boatload of Pansies Sale." Mother Nature gave us lemons and we made lemonade!

—Teresa

Meadow View Growers

New Carlisle, Ohio