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Features

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Point-of-Sale & You

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Effective advertising leads customers to your garden center, and quality products and competitive prices lead them to your sales counter. To ensure that their experience at the sales counter is a favorable one, be certain you have a Point-of-Sale (POS) system that that suits your garden center.

We asked five garden centers to share their views on four different POS systems. They use software fashioned to fit the needs of their particular garden center, which makes smarter selling a guarantee.

Retail Sales Manager

When Keith Barker, owner of The Gardener's Center and Florist in Darien, Connecticut, was ready to replace his eight-year-old Biztracker system, he researched two garden center POS systems before he chose Retail Sales Manager Version 2.0. "I opted out of garden center software; there was too much information," Keith says. For instance, he prefers not to break down the tree sales into species, but collectively lists them as trees or shrubs.

According to a Deloitte & Touche study, the technical support offered on a POS system is the most important consideration when buying hardware and software (see sidebar). Keith is delighted with the immediate technical support offered from his consultant in Darien. The consultant's computer is linked to the computer at The Gardener's Center, which made it stress-free when Keith wanted to relocate buttons on the software's initial sales screen. All it took was a phone call and the buttons were moved. The cost for The Gardener's Center POS system and support for three years is $15,000.

The biggest adjustment for Keith and his employees was the new system's touch screen. Missy Cintron, an employee at The Gardener's Center for ten years, says it took only two days to learn Retail Sales Manager. She adds that the new software eliminated steps in the sales process. Now, with the integration of the credit card machine, the POS software and DSL, a transaction takes three seconds. That's a lifesaver for employees—no more exasperated sighs from customers waiting in line.

Ines Bedoya, The Gardener's Center bookkeeper, says she learned the system after one week with the demonstration. She processes inventory reports, sales reports by department, customer balances and history

and daily sales reports. And she doesn't have to wait until the end of the month to do billing—she can do it any day of the month.

One of the time-saving aspects of the system enables Keith and his staff to look up any product by name or code number, a function that wasn't available with the previous system. The codes from Biztracker transferred to the new system, which makes it effortless for Keith to order hardgoods.

Sage Pro

Eleven and a half miles from The Gardener's Center is Sam Bridge Nursery and Greenhouses in Greenwich, Connecticut, whose ninety-three-year-old owner (Mr. Bridge, of course) comes to work every day. Their POS system is Sage Pro, which is not an industry program, but is being adapted to nurseries and garden centers, says Sam's daughter Mary Jo Palmer.

Accucom Consulting in Westport, Connecticut, has worked with Sam Bridge Nursery for 10 years and introduced Sage Pro to the garden center three years ago. When considering Accucom, the system's service is the "biggest thing," says Mary Jo's brother, Sam Bridge II. As with The Gardener's Center, Sam Bridge Nursery chose local technical support for the immediate attention it offers.

Mary Jo and Sam like best the Sage Pro feature that tracks customers' histories. Sam says, "When a customer comes in and says, 'I want the plant that looks like this …,' we can look up their history and see what it was."

The POS system can produce a great deal of reports; Sam and Mary Jo have the dilemma of too much information. "Tons of reports, if you have the time to look at them," says Sam of how much Sage Pro can generate. "I don't use it to its full potential," admits Mary Jo. The system can generate reports of hardgoods, when-to-order reports, expenses and profit and loss. Accucom wrote extra programs that the nursery needed: daily sales tally, credit card report, house account report and cash accounts.

An unsatisfactory aspect of the data entry component is the use of both Latin names and common names for plants, which can get confusing for the non-horticulturists on the staff. The need for a strict vocabulary of terms is apparent. As an example, Mary Jo says statuary can be difficult to describe; the employee must use the correct words to describe the item or must refer to the price to avoid confusion. Also, Mary Jo says, "Inventory is a nightmare." Sam and Mary Jo prefer not to invest $10,000 for a hand-held scanner. As a result, taking inventory requires carrying the extensive product list to each greenhouse for the tallies.

Since 1994 the nursery has spent a total of $500,000 on hardware, software and technical support with a monthly contract. Upgrades alone cost $100,000, with software and hardware including monitors, keyboards and printers. Currently, Sam is looking for a new POS system and will be researching more industry-related software.

CounterPoint

After thorough investigation, two west coast garden centers selected the CounterPoint POS system. Lynn Snodgrass, owner/manager of Drake's 7 Dees in Portland, Oregon, researched systems for two years before she decided on CounterPoint. Preston Oka, owner of Yamagami's Nursery in Cupertino, California, had four systems in mind before he chose CounterPoint. He likes the easy set-up, the ability to import data files and

the security features. Lynn considers it to be retail-friendly, compatible to industry needs and easily linked to Excel for reports.

Both Yamagami's and Drake's 7 Dees use hand-held scanners to assist with inventory. "We've been able to track inventory and identify what moves and when, which makes future buying much easier," says Preston. "POS allows better control and tracking of sales and pricing because discounts are pre-set and controlled by management," he adds. Yamagami's spends about $20,000 a year on maintenance and back-ups. The server has been upgraded twice since the system's 2001 installation. Lynn says the follow-up care for her system is excellent, but in hindsight, Lynn wishes she knew how difficult or expensive it was going to be to link CounterPoint with the merchant service provider.

CounterPoint offers Yamagami's Nursery a special feature that enables the garden center to "manufacture" a product, such as a planted Easter basket, made up of items from several categories in the store.

Mercury Advantage

Schaefer Greenhouses in Montgomery, Illinois, has similar circumstances. "Because we are a flower shop and garden center …, our customers cross from one department to the next. Our products are combined into one purchase and can be arranged into another product altogether," says secretary/treasurer Mary Ann Kutnick. "A wicker basket of assorted blooming perennials accented with silk flowers, floral ribbons and feather butterflies delivered to a patient in the hospital combines garden products with floral products and services."

Schaefer Greenhouses uses Mercury Advantage, which is furnished by FTD (Florists' Transworld Delivery). Nine years ago, when a fire destroyed the offices at Schaefer's, the staff turned a staggering loss into a positive situation. They upgraded their system with advanced technology and improved support that allows them to send and receive out-of-town orders through the FTD network of florists.

FTD's headquarters are thirty minutes from Schaefer Greenhouses. "Support is always the key to any system," says Mary Ann. "Having them in our back yard has been very helpful."

While Mercury Advantage is "a great management tool for tracking sales, deliveries, receivables and employee productivity," says Mary Ann, they'll be converting their system later this year to benefit from new technology.

Smarter selling translates to having all the elements of better business in place. As nursery owner Preston Oka advises, "The bottom line is we are better because we have POS." Smarter, streamlined selling—imagine the POSsibilities.

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