

Features

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Retailer Profile: Making the Customer Count

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"It's not about gouging that last customer—that's not what we do," said Lisa Lautenbach, who, along with her husband Earl, runs The Watering Can Flower Market in Vineland, Ontario.

Every person that walks through the door is treated as if they're the very first customer, which Lisa says is their number one goal.

"There's no client that's too small," she explained. "We service everyone, and in this economy, you better serve everyone."

(Left to right) Earl and Lisa Lautenbach, owners of The Watering Can Flower Market in Vineland, Ontario, along with their nephew Byron Dodd and Blake the Golden Retriever.

For the past 18 years, The Watering Can has been providing local residents with top-line cut flowers, containers, hanging baskets and bedding plants. And some aren't even that local—Lisa said they have people driving from more than two hours away to buy plants and flowers. "We're becoming a destination center," she said.

Flowers for Everyone

Originally started as a florist shop, the 1,000-sq. ft. area that used to be too big for them is now bursting at the seams with fresh cut flowers, pre-made containers in all sizes, and specialty potted plants. This part of their business covers the largest piece of the pie—about 70%—and nothing is behind glass or in coolers. All of the flowers, which Lisa buys in from other growers, are out in the open for people to make their own bouquets or have a staff member create a custom bunch. Customers can also choose from a variety of pre-made containers in all sizes and price ranges, from \$9.99 to \$250.00. Every purchase is gift wrapped for free and no flower is older than five days, so the client is guaranteed a truly fresh product.

Lisa and her designers get their inspiration from the Dutch flower markets and stay up on the trends by

perusing European magazines and even taking trips overseas for new ideas. Much of the cut flower side of the business is providing arrangements for weddings and funerals, which really allows them to get to know their customers.

“We’re so blessed to be in this business,” Lisa says with a smile. “You get to be with [the customer] through weddings and babies, but also at their lowest times. You have to have fun with your customers, but you can be emotional with them, too, especially for funerals.”

Class in Session

Right next to the florist area is the tropical plant room and the classroom where she teaches all of her workshops throughout the year. Beginning in March and running until the winter holidays, Lisa does more than 300 workshops a year, each one filled to capacity with many on waiting lists for the next available class. In May and June, Lisa is at the store every night—including three times on Saturdays—conducting workshops. “It’s a vital part of our business,” said Lisa, because it keeps their customers involved and coming back for more products.

This past March, Lisa held a BYOC (Bring Your Own Container) workshop where more than 700 participants brought in containers and filled them with their choice of young plants. Lisa and her team take the containers to a special holding area to grow them out for the customers and call them when they’re ready to be picked up in spring. With these containers, along with all of the other custom combinations they do, Lisa estimates they’ve grown 8,000 total units this spring.

This also includes the combinations they grow for members of their Urn Club. Every member of the club gets an urn they can fill with plants all year round. A yearly fee of \$120, \$135 or \$150 will get you a small, medium or large-sized urn and access to a special area of the garden center where you can choose the plants for it. You also get a free container workshop for being an Urn Club member. “We never want your urn empty,” said Lisa.

Bedding Time

From the basket and container section, customers can walk into the area that looks more like a typical garden center. Here, Lisa sells pots and flats of annual bedding plants that they grow themselves. They don’t sell shrubs and only provide a few perennials because “those are for the big guys,” said Lisa. “You need to find your niche and stick with it.”

Next year, she’s planning on limiting flat sales to impatiens only; the rest of the bedding product will be sold in 4- and 6-in. pots. “Flat production is really going down. People want instant planting,” Lisa said. In the fall, they sell about 18,000-20,000 garden mums, and offer poinsettias and evergreens for the Christmas holidays.

Family First

Not only is The Watering Can precious to Lisa because it’s her livelihood, but also because her sister Marja was a part of it. Marja opened the first location in St. Catharines 15 years ago in an old butcher shop—it already had coolers for the cut flowers, so it was ideal. Four years ago, Marja passed away from cancer, but her children have taken over the St. Catharines florist to ensure this location remained in the family.

It was natural for Lisa to enter the flower business. Raised around her parents' vegetable farm in Holland, Lisa and her family immigrated to Canada when she was 7 years old. She knows what it takes to work hard—for her business, her employees and most importantly, her customers.

“Your ideas have to stay fresh because you need to bring them back in,” explained Lisa. “We’re just a small dot on the map, but we hope we make a difference in people’s lives.” **GP**