

Features

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“Scout”ing for the Next-Generation Gardener

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The ever-elusive new customer is something retailers are always looking for. Where do we find those folks who are just trying their first potted tomato plant or have a newfound interest in hummingbird watching or have just moved to the area?

We know that buying habits can be hard to change once established, so if you don't become someone's go-to shop early on in their relationship with your industry, it's even harder to get them to consider a new option. The best option is to always be top of mind within the community, so as soon as someone develops a new interest in gardening, your shop immediately comes to mind.

Children's programs at your IGC are a fantastic way to do this. It brings young families into your shop regularly, it builds strong relationships with your community, it fosters a relationship and respect with plants with young people, and it simply gets more foot traffic into your shop. Offering programs specifically for Scouts—both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts of America—are a great way to offer structured, themed, on-brand workshops and activities that will help develop that next generation gardener.

How to Get Started

When considering adding Scout programs to your offerings, the biggest consideration is the program lead. Ideally, you'll have someone running the new programs who has a background in children's programming (not necessarily an expert gardener). The content is geared towards elementary school-aged children, and won't need to be very complex, so the gardening expertise is secondary to being able to attend to the needs of young children. A former teacher is a fantastic fit for the position. The lead should also be creative, energetic, in touch with your IGC's core values, goals and branding, and be a good researcher.

Once the program lead is selected, determine if you're going to offer programs for both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts of America, or if you're going to first focus on one. The requirements for badges are quite different between the two, and at our IGC, we've found that the programs cannot be used interchangeably between the two.

The Differences

Girl Scouts generally offer many, many badges that can be achieved completely in an afternoon. Boy Scouts of America offer fewer badges and they take longer to achieve, often after a series of activities are completed, so your

offering would be for a component of a larger requirement.

Your program lead should then begin researching. The program needs to be designed with all the official requirements of the Scout program in mind first, so it qualifies as an allowable activity. The research should include:

- What badge makes the most sense for your IGC
- Which activities support that particular badge qualifications
- How they can be modified for different age groups
- What other locations in your town offer Scouting activities (there's no need to duplicate badges)
- How large your local groups are
- What days of the week they meet
- Who's active in the Scouting community that already shops with you
- Where on your property is a safe place for a group of young children and their parents
- Where to source materials, etc.

Groups generally meet multiple times a month after school, sometimes at school, and are always looking for new opportunities for meetings off-site.

When developing the program contents, it's important to choose something that clearly ties in with your IGC, like leaves in the fall, flower pressing or starting seeds. By designing a program with first the needs of the students, then the needs of your shop, you've covered all the basis for a future symbiotic relationship. Choose an activity that can easily be modified to be simpler or more challenging based on the age group.

About Those Badges

We've found that with Girl Scouts, ordering the physical badges from the official scouting online shops and offering them to the Scouts at the completion of the program has been the best way to go. The children get the instant gratification of leaving with a completed project and a real badge, where otherwise they would have to wait a few weeks for the leaders to order the badge they qualified for at your shop.

You can even take it one step further and design a custom badge with your IGC logo, saying Scouting at <insert your shop name> and give the girls two badges. This also gives an opportunity to have Boy Scouts leave with a badge as well, since they won't be able to complete the requirements for an official badge in one session at your shop.

The Final Touches

After all of these preliminary steps, the program will be ready to finalize, market and launch. Develop a price point for the programs first, keeping it low—under \$10 preferably—with the cost of materials, including badges, in mind. Create a schedule of what days of the week these can be offered, and when your shop is most able to handle groups of children and their parents.

There'll be numerous cars in the parking lot, bathrooms being used and potentially new people in your shop who're unfamiliar with the layout and offerings. It may require an extra cleaning session ahead of time, extra staff or similar considerations. Refrain from scheduling just before closing, so if families want to linger and browse after the meeting there's an opportunity to do so. Determine the general capacity for your space and whether it will be a "Scouts only" event, which generally means one scout plus one parent, or a "scouting family" event, where it may be siblings and multiple adults.

To market the program, consider social media posts and newsletter mentions first, stating that you're now offering Scouting programs and contact you for more details. This is free and can identify existing customers that are involved with Scouts and can help connect you to other Scout leaders in your area.

The Day of the Event

Once the groups are on site, you give them a fantastic time! The program lead should offer an educational, energetic, fun session that encourages a love of the garden. Involve the parents in the process so they get in on the fun as well. Let them know about any upcoming activities that may interest the whole family or just the parents. When they're in the midst of a great experience, it's a fantastic time to convince them to do it again. Make sure adequate clean up facilities are available; the kids may get dirty.

Keep a contacts list so after your first successful offering you can work on your next, then market to your existing contacts. There's potential to creating multiple visits from one contact once you begin adding more badges to your program offerings. As you grow the program, you can offer one badge a "season," so groups can visit multiple times a year, or you can offer several badges at one time, also allowing one group several visits a year. Scouts are also always looking for locations to set up fundraising booths (cookies for Girl Scouts and popcorn for Boy Scouts), and your shop may be a logical location once the relationship grows.

Getting Scouting programs going at your shop can lead to some amazing experiences that children can remember forever, which is exactly the top-of-mind consideration you want. It makes your shop an approachable, unassuming community partner and develops a whole new generation of potential gardeners for the industry for years to come. The children will have a great time and will all of the sudden be excited about and asking to go to the garden center because that's where they did a fun activity or got to go to the special hidden area. Of course, Mom and Dad won't mind either because the staff was so kind to their children—plus now they know how great your selection is. **GP**

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Finding Out About Badges

For Girl Scouts, you can visit the webpage to see all the badges that apply—look under the Outdoors section:

<https://www.girlscouts.org/en/our-program/badges.html>

For Boy Scouts, visit [scouting.org/programs](https://www.scouting.org/programs) and click through the Cub Scouts (ages 5-10) and Scouts BSA (ages 11-17) links.