

Features

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Maker's Market Retail Tricks for Brick-and-Mortar Stores

Katie Elzer-Peters



Beth, an employee at Bradford Botanical Co. in Atlanta, works among the foliage.

The MuckRock mural of coneflowers at The Forest Flower in Indianapolis.

Sarah Mertz with her store-branded Jeep.

Houseplants and edibles, two of the fastest-growing categories in horticulture, are hands-on plants. New “plant parents” don’t take up gardening because they want to look at something pretty. They buy a houseplant or a tomato because they want an experience.

So what if they came to your store because of the experience they have while visiting you? What if they were willing to pay higher prices because of that experience? What if they returned again and again because of that experience?

As Ryann Bradford tells it, they can, they will and they do. She opened her business, Bradford Botanical Co., in Atlanta in 2019. “I had houseplants delivered to my garage,” she notes.

In 2020, after a COVID layoff from working in corporate logistics for a decade, she moved to a brick-and-mortar retail space, but maintains the “pop-up” feel with limited hours, Saturdays and Sundays from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Key takeaway? Posting limited hours creates a “special occasion” feeling and more motivation for customers to make the trek to the shop. The limited hours also allow her to pursue other creative endeavors.

She’s not creating false scarcity to lure buyers, though. Peruse her Instagram account (@bradfordbotanicalco) and you’ll see why 60% of her customers are repeat (and repeat and repeat) customers. The shop is basically an extension of her aesthetic, her personality and her motto, “Paradise can be at my house.”

She wanted to help people create a home space that “you don’t have to or want to escape from” and her feed reflects that. You’ll see posts about fashion, music, social justice movements, all enveloped by plants. Her feed inspires me to enjoy my plants in a much more active way—drawing them, moving them around and, you guessed it, acquiring more!

The shop has got to be even better in person, though. The pictures show comfy couches to sit on (and take selfies on) and huge tropicals that envelop visitors.

“Our customers frequently say ‘Thank you for being here. Thank you for creating this business and being so welcoming,’” she says. Those repeat customers? Many of them have never owned a plant before. “They buy one and return the next week for another. They tell me their stories. They bring their friends.” Not necessarily because they want to buy plants, but because they want to belong. Not because they’re gardeners, but because they’re creatives, and thanks to people like Rayann, growing and interacting with plants is increasingly a mandatory part of the creative lifestyle.

Carefully Curate & Frequently Turn Inventory

Leah Flannagan operates The Forest Flower in Indianapolis, a garden center with a separate houseplant shop on the property that houses a treasure trove of plants, pottery, jewelry, stickers, watering cans, vases, crystals and décor in a relatively small space. If I lived nearby, I’d be venturing over at least every six weeks or so to see what was new and that’s by design.

Leah says, “I wanted the houseplant shop to feel like Anthropologie. There’s this sense of discovery there. You know that every time you go in, you’ll find something new.”

She does this by turning inventory frequently. “If a customer comes in and says, ‘Wow, I really like that,’ I say, ‘Better take it, then, because I only have two and I won’t be getting more in,’” she says, adding they don’t sell rare plants. It doesn’t matter. Sell regular plants in a venue that invites lingering, that invites “making a pile on the counter,” instead of grabbing it and going to the next thing.

Another trick up Leah’s sleeve? The MuckRock mural of coneflowers on the side of one of the buildings. “People will drive for miles and miles to take a picture of or with a mural.”

Be Deliberate About Branding

Have you noticed how popular stickers are right now? Almost every vendor at every pop up market I attend has stickers for sale or to give away, and for good reason: people want the stickers. They take them and slap them on their laptops or cars or water bottles, becoming walking advertisements. Those stickers also serve as signals to other people: “I’m a plant mom.” “Vegetables are cool.” And that’s what Seth Godin (I know, I talk about him incessantly, but he’s so smart and so right) calls the “people like us do things like this” effect. Your goal, if you want rabid new fans, is to become the “this” in “people like us do things like this.”

Does that actually happen? Yes. Just ask Sarah Mertz from The Plant Outpost. A COVID-related layoff forced her to take her plant pop-up business to the next level in order to support herself and her daughter. In June 2020, she opened a houseplant store in a shipping container in the trendy Cargo District of Wilmington. Visitors drove from all over the state to buy a plant and take pictures in front of the container.

“Someone from New York City visiting a friend in Jacksonville (about an hour away from Wilmington) made their friend road trip here so they could shop,” Sarah says. Sarah has nice plants, cool pottery by local makers, and, yes, stickers. (I need a “Visit the Plant Outpost without buying anything challenge.”) A cactus pop-up at the shipping container literally stopped traffic on the (very busy) street running past the shop.

Her store is a prime example of “people like us” (cool, young makers and adventurers) “do things like this,” (shop at the Plant Outpost) and talk about it incessantly on Instagram. So much so that Sarah had to move from the shipping container to a storefront in the Cargo District so she had more space.

“I still can’t keep plants in stock,” she says. Her newest brand vehicle to maintain the adventure of the original Outpost is an actual vehicle—a steel blue Jeep with her logo on it. “I’ll take it to pop-ups and I can just open the trunk and set up the display.” Look for selfies with it on Instagram soon. “I’ll also probably rent it out with plants for weddings and special events. Why not?”

Participate in Pop-ups

Sarah and Ryann, in addition to maintaining brick-and-mortar retail space, also attend pop-up markets.

“I take a curated selection of our most popular plants to give people a real feel for what they’ll find in the store,” says Sarah.

Ryann echos that pop-ups are a wonderful marketing tool. “Our storefront is in a low foot traffic area, so we have kind of a migrating shop to connect with multiple customer bases.”

I get it. Your hands are full and you’re tired. Are the hands of the 20-something go-getter you hired last month full? What about offering them a profit share and letting them run with your new venture? With your backing: a tent, an Instagram account, a mobile POS (like Square), some props for merchandising, plants to sell, and a commission agreement your can-do-it employee can hit the market circuit or maintain an “on site” weekend pop-up. Maybe they can organize a mural installation or a selfie station and publicize it.

Current and consistent branding, interesting experiences, beautiful aesthetics, curated inventory and a welcoming environment are all elements IGCs can use to differentiate themselves from big boxes and increase the bottom line. Pick something, just one thing (I vote for experiences) and try it. Grow from there. **GP**

Katie Elzer-Peters is the owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a green-industry digital marketing agency. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com.