

Features

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Create Your Own Command Central

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An informed, involved team is the backbone of any retail operation, but training and communicating effectively can be an overwhelming challenge, no matter the size of your operation. Bringing seasonal employees on board each year, educating staff on plants and products, and keeping everyone working toward the same goal takes time and effort in the midst of the day-to-day challenges of owning a garden center.

Like many IGCs, Down to Earth in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, was operating its business through a variety of platforms and procedures, but consistency across the company was lacking. That became apparent last year when an employee engagement survey revealed two company-wide pain points that desperately needed to be addressed: communication and education.

Managers and team members alike expressed the need for uniformity in education and procedures across Down to Earth's 12 departments. From the café to the landscape division to the retail store, people were feeling disjointed, and the team realized they needed a central location for news, updates, metrics and training. "We were using all sorts of different things, but nothing really fit together well," said Sarah Polzin, retail operations manager.

So when she learned about the trademarked ConnectSpace intranet platform at a conference, she realized it was exactly what she was looking for and more. Offering a single intranet hub for all of the business' crucial information, it was a tool that would increase efficiency, encourage engagement and improve communication.

"The team wanted one place where they can go to have that community in a digital sense," she said. "We have a wide cornucopia of offerings, and we had some people feeling very disjointed. So, this allowed for one single platform."

Creating Solutions

Starting with the pain points identified in the employee engagement survey, the Down to Earth team dove in headfirst, selecting existing solutions and creating some of their own with the ConnectSpace team. "It had so much potential possibility for us to grow it and customize it," Sarah said.

Down to Earth got the whole team involved early on, asking supervisors and leaders for their input. When the first version went live, Sarah solicited feedback from all staff and worked with the folks at ConnectSpace to implement new tools and resources, showing the team that their suggestions and input were vital to developing the online hub.



That input is also crucial for the ConnectSpace team, who have been working with IGCs for years to develop and refine the platform. “ConnectSpace is built for garden centers by garden centers,” said John Kennedy, ConnectSpace co-founder. “So anything we build is built out of a specific need from an independent garden center that we can then share with other IGCs who have the same challenge.”



Down to Earth customized its hub with brand colors and logos, adding pages like the Getting Started hub with basic information on where to park and how to use a walkie-talkie, a Knowledge College where staff can earn points for learning, a Plant & Product Library and more. They then tasked each department leader to develop a page for their team with a welcome from the supervisor and specific training videos and documents.

To keep everyone up to speed on how the company is performing, they also added a custom KPI tracker to visualize data and show crucial metrics at a glance. Throughout the process, Sarah was impressed with the ease of navigation and the functionality of the site. ConnectSpace made it easy to find crucial information, saving employees valuable hours of time spent searching for resources.

“Sometimes when you’re using off-the-shelf products, you’re using their white label solution,” co-founder Souny Kennedy said. “With ConnectSpace, its functionality, design and color make it seamless. You just glide into the application, and you don’t realize it’s a tracking database or a learning portal.”

Getting the Team on Board

ConnectSpace’s success at Down to Earth was dependent on employee adoption, just like any new tool. Beginning the rollout by soliciting feedback helped Down to Earth create buy-in. “It starts as an investment of time and you have to intentionally build out that framework, but once that framework is built out, it’s fostering innovation,” Sarah emphasized. “It’s fostering engagement, accountability and really that ownership mentality that we all want to see as garden center owners.”

To encourage team members to explore the new platform, Down to Earth conducted a scavenger hunt and offered everyone who completed the search a free lunch. “That helped get that buy-in and that engagement and familiarity that was necessary in order for us to really adopt it fully,” Sarah added.

On the more personal side of engagement, Down to Earth’s platform has a community space for the whole team to stay connected. And the Shout-out Board allows employees to recognize each other for demonstrating one of the company’s five core values. “That really created a lot of buy-in right away because people were really excited to catch others doing awesome things and brag a bit,” Sarah said.

Reaping the Benefits

After just one year, Down to Earth is seeing positive changes in employee confidence and engagement. Instead of team leaders answering the same questions over and over during the spring, staff know where to go for information. Having the knowledge and training they need at their fingertips has empowered them.

“Of the pain points I hear, No. 1 is always training. I hear it all the time: ‘There’s so much training out there and we don’t know where to put it. Half of it’s bookmarked. Half of it’s a link in an email that I forwarded to my staff to read three months ago.’ Now, you can put it under the Training tab and all you have to do is go to ConnectSpace to find it,” Souny said.

Sarah is seeing more and more employees use the Knowledge College to cross-train and learn new skills. Not only

are they going above and beyond what's expected of them, they're motivated, engaged and confident.

"I would say it's been a total game changer for us," she said. "People feel like they have more connectivity with each other and they're not so isolated. It's created this virtual community. It's increased our efficiencies astronomically as far as getting information out, having things accessible at the fingertip from processes to education to checklists for training—you name it. We're not really sure how we did life without it."

Everything In One Place

As a grower-retailer with a landscape division, café and more, Down to Earth had some unique needs. Working with the ConnectSpace team, they were able to customize the platform, adding features like the following:

- **Grower Tracker:** follows plants through the growing process and shows disease issues, what's selling and what has been dumped, giving them solid metrics
- **Landscaper Tracker:** houses job locations, statuses and materials in one place
- **Marketing Portal:** keeps everyone up to date on company-wide promotions
- **KPI Tracker:** keeps the team engaged with the business' success
- **Manager's Portal:** makes general metrics like gross profit margin, sales goals, units per transaction quick and easy to find and understand, with the option to dive deeper into the numbers
- **Knowledge College:** houses in-house and vendor training to maintain consistent education across departments, offer cross-training opportunities and keep product information at employees' fingertips
- **Digital Forms:** keeps both customer and employee requests from getting lost
- **Plant & Product Library:** divided into departments like perennials, trees, shrubs, evergreens, herbs, veggies and plant health, including only items the IGC offers

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