

Cover Story

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Finding Your “Why”

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Brandon Kirby and his wife, Brooke.

Something Brandon Kirby, this year's Young Retailer Award winner, said during our pre-award fancy dinner at Cultivate'25 stuck out to me. He mentioned finding your “why”—as in why you get up in the morning and go through this life—and for good reason. Brandon's journey may have started at a very young age in the garden center business, but it didn't stay there and, like so many I've talked to, he found his way back with a greater appreciation for how to tackle the rigors of a uniquely seasonal and challenging business. One that was struggling, too, pre-COVID.

His dad, also Brandon, credits him with “bringing the dead back to life,” by injecting fresh ideas and strategies into the stagnant business, resulting in sales that have doubled in the past five years and profits that have tripled.

“This is my son, whom I am exceedingly proud of,” he wrote to us. “He has taken our garden center, which I founded and ran for 40 years, into the modern era. We were a slowly dying business, seeped in the old ways of doing business.”

Beginnings

Of course, his story starts like so many who grew up in the business: spending time at Rainbow Gardens in San Antonio, Texas, the retail garden center his dad founded in 1976. In a twist of fortune telling, there are even pictures of Brandon at a toy cash register “selling” plants.

“I liked taking money and I liked giving people plants—I do remember that was fun,” he recalled. “It is fun. I still have that same feeling nowadays.”

In his teenage years, though, the shine wore off, and he recalled not wanting to go to the store anymore, noting it smelled like chemicals and everyone seemed grouchy (it's that Texas heat in peak summer). He added him being a bit of a troublemaker didn't help, either. He moved on to college at Texas Tech University, earning a business degree (though he still took a horticulture class and grew plants in his dorm room). After school he landed his first corporate gig at a gas and oil company in the fracking division, which taught him a lot even on his first day about how the rest of it would go.

Location: Bandera store, San Antonio, Texas
Size: 6 acres
Sales: \$7.65 million
Employees: 56 total; 27 full time and part time year-round
Top 5 Categories:
1. Perennials
2. Annuals
3. Shrubs
4. Potting Mix
5. Houseplants
Website: rainbowgardens.biz

“My first day, I remember walking in and I got a card and it was like, ‘Dear employee 2345: We’re so glad you’re here and a part of our team.’ And I was like, wow, that’s really not personal,” he laughed.

He recognized quickly on that first day they were having a mass layoff event, and once someone trained him on a segment of the business, they were often laid off soon after. A harsh lesson, for sure, and he soon moved to a less pressurized and more insulated segment in internal auditing, which afforded him the ability to travel and learn more about the operations and financial side.

Applied Knowledge

Brandon could tell his company was prepping him for a leadership position, but in his heart he wasn’t sure that’s what he wanted.

“I was so tired of sitting and freezing in an office. I’d go to the window and I’d look out and it’d be a beautiful fall day,” he recalled. “And I just realized that I wasn’t destined to sit at a desk. I had this yearning to go outside.”

He began asking his dad for a job at the garden center and they negotiated a rate that allowed him to return (albeit at a pay cut from the corporate world). The return included a lot of moving parts as Brandon’s dad, while staying as a majority owner, retired to North Carolina while Brandon worked with their business partner, Dan.

As he got up and running, there were lessons from his time in internal auditing that helped him at Rainbow.

“We had this audit system where you would have severity of findings. A green needs attention, but you know it’s not of material concern, and then yellow is we should fix this quickly, and red is like this could materially affect our financial statements. And that’s a really big deal if you’re a publicly list company,” Brandon said. “When I came back to the garden center, I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, these are all red findings. Everything we do, there’s so much risk involved here. Why do we do it like this?’ And they would say, ‘Well, it’s the way it’s always been done.’”

And it’s no wonder, processes often get piece-mealed together over years, and in the heat of the busy season, repetition becomes standard. When Brandon came back he was able to look at the business through a fresh lens and analyze whether or not practices made sense.

“Especially if you’ve been doing it for so long, you’re just not even thinking about how to change it. You’re just doing the same thing week in and week out,” he noted. “And that’s the biggest risk to our industry—complacency, you know?”



Moving at the Speed of Your Team

Change is never easy and it can be especially difficult coming from the outside and making necessary changes. It was tough for Brandon in the beginning because you can't force change, but you can ask for buy-in.

"You really can't push plans down people's throats," he said. "Once you have their buy-in, then you have to be able to define what success looks like and articulate that."

Once everyone's on the same page about what it takes to be successful, that's where the real magic happens.

"It's something that can't be done quickly. You have to move at the speed of your team and that was a really tough one for me," he added. "I always heard the African proverb, 'If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.'"

Part of pulling it all together as a team meant getting the right people in the right places and moving away from all processes going through one person to having multiple people in management. Brandon said some of their biggest catalysts for change happened when they moved people to different positions, finding where employees could thrive. Hiring has also been an interesting endeavor because they'd hired people who by all rights should have worked great—they had all the right qualifications, but they

ended up not working out. Now, he's focused on hiring for passion and training the rest. It was a lesson they learned coming out of COVID.

"There's a few people that came in and the only thing that they had was passion and a love for the brand and wanting to wake up every day and do better," he said. "And they have moved into the highest level positions that we have and they've risen exceptionally quickly through the ranks."

"We can teach you everything you need to know to do our business. What I can't teach you is to have a good attitude and to show up every day."

And then it comes back to finding your "why."

"Everybody has their 'why.' And the 'why' for the people with passion, they're usually really vocal about it and it's a lot easier to align their 'why' with the company."

Making Strides

When Brandon first started, one of the first things they tackled was the need to bring in more customers. He knew accomplishing that one feat would strain the rest of the resources that were already stretched thin, but it was a necessity. He began working on the marketing, reinventing the website and creating an SEO strategy that played up the content provided by their on-staff blogger and switching the advertising from newspaper to digital.

As customers started coming, there was another problem: stock-outs. They were positioning themselves as the experts, but then were often out of the mainstay products customers were looking for. Not only that, but without a



point-of-sale system there was no way to measure success in different categories.

Then, COVID hit and the whole thing broke loose. Brandon said it was sheer grit and determination from the team to get through such a challenging time, which also brought in so many new customers. They realized they needed some middle management to reorganize processes and create buffers, as well as cross-train and document each job's processes to make sure it can be replicated. Before, they'd been operating via a spoke-and-wheel scenario where everything ran through one person or a few key people.

They also looked to technology to streamline and become more efficient. They invested in a new VMX POS system, which Brandon credited for radically changing the garden center.

"It's been cited a million times, but I can't stress how impactful it was to the entire garden center," he said. "We were afraid it was gonna change our culture, but if anything, it just made people buy in more."

Sharing numbers and setting goals that everyone understands and works toward has had a profound effect on the team.

"It's like we caught a tailwind now because people feel like they know what's going on and are a part of something, rather than just kind of basically playing a game and not knowing the rules," he added.

One important piece to the puzzle of adding the POS system is he hired a project manager to work with VMX and learn everything about it she possibly could. She dug into the minutiae of the system and could help the team at Rainbow maximize its usage. When they launched it, they were using upwards of 80% to 85% of its capabilities.

Creating Lasting Partnerships

One other initiative Brandon started was reaching out to other garden centers in San Antonio. He did some market research that showed independent garden centers accounted for about 1% to 2% of the green goods sales in the area. He realized they could better serve the community by partnering up, and there were a few key ways they did it. They meet a couple of times a year to talk trends and strategic partnerships, including working together to encourage growers to supply certain plants. Individually they couldn't buy enough, but combined their numbers were enough to convince growers to grow it.

Another example is the "rodeo tomato." For the past 25 years, Texas Agrilife Extension would select a "rodeo tomato," as a fundraiser and it was a big deal. But this year the funding changed and there wasn't going to be one. The San Antonio garden centers got together, worked with extension to select a tomato to be the "rodeo tomato" and asked a local grower to supply it to the partner retailers. They were able to save this long-standing tradition and buy a little more time to get next year's tomato worked out.

Looking Ahead

During a time when Brandon was working through challenges in the business, he also faced a profound sadness in his personal life that changed everything. His mom passed away during COVID right after he and his wife, Brooke, got married. It was a difficult time, one where he said everything just lost its color.

"I felt like I was kind of climbing out of a hole for a long time," he said. "I'm not gonna say the business put me in, but just like the circumstances of the perfect storm of not being prepared meets the tidal wave."

Today he's moving ahead with a positive outlook. "I think right now we've got a really interesting and kind of effervescent feel in the company, where everybody's really excited about the future," he said. "We're planning on expanding and I'll let you know in a few years if that was a good idea."

They've got the land and they're working on a site plan now. Their situation is unique, in that they actually already have two locations, but they're run independently, so this would be Brandon's location's second store.

Aside from the business, Brandon and Brooke love to travel, and they just completed a trip to Croatia and Slovenia. Of course, part of their travels involve horticulture—through food.

"We love to go experience new cultures and try new foods. And, you know, I love plants in a lot of different ways, but I'm particularly interested in how people eat them in other places," he said. "The culinary world opens up a whole new aspect in horticulture. And so that's been a lot of fun."

When they're not traveling, Brandon enjoys reading and listening to audio books (including lots of business and strategy books) and spending time with their goldendoodle, Lucy.

And while there's still plenty of stress in the garden center versus the corporate job (but definitely a better view), it sounds like the garden center and the plants within it are truly part of his "why."

"I'm really grateful for this opportunity because I get to meet other like-minded individuals, but it just strikes me again and again how awesome our industry is and how it doesn't matter if you're like a minnow or a shark or a whale in this industry—everybody's so willing to help," he said. "I think it is such a wholesome and special industry where different types of people, you know, races, countries, all come together and have this commonality of plants."

"It's so cool to be at the crossroads of that, on the retail side. We are the place where everybody's paths converge."

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