greenPROFIT

Features

4/30/2026

Adapt or Die Create an Experience, Don’t Sell Product

John Stanley, Sid Raisch & Dries Jansen

The world of retailing has, and is, changing rapidly. Some retailers focus on selling products, while others focus on creating memorable experiences and getting customers to “Buy the Dream” rather than “Buy the Plant.” Each retailer must decide which model suits their business. Whatever you do, don’t get stuck in the middle.

Whether it is intentional or accidental, an experience is being created. The question is more about whether it is a memorable experience, and whether that memory is a positive or negative one.

The premise of retailing is to add perceived value to the products being sold. The consumer experience plays the greatest role in the perception of value. Before delving into experiential retailing, it is important to ensure all experiences are “on brand.” In other words, the experience relates to your values. Retail stores like Apple, Nike, Birchbox and Starbucks (especially their new Starbucks Reserve Roasteries stores) do this exceptionally well. The key is to make the customer experience memorable; you want them to talk to their friends about you and for them to become more loyal to you. What are the keys?

- Activities that engage them
- Stories intertwined with your brand

Dawson Garden Centre in Perth, Western Australia—a simple way of enhancing the experience: give a 22-year-old a paint brush and see what they can do.





Start with the Journey

As customers walk through different retail zones, each one should create a different experience for them. This can be achieved by a different style of merchandising design, different colors, different music and different space allocations, with all of them being on-brand. IKEA is brilliant at achieving this. Garden retailers can do the same. Vignette displays showing various garden styles are more engaging than rows of plants—for example a Pollinator’s Paradise or a Curbside Rain Garden.

Like gardening, contextual retailing is a seasonal event. Gardens change with the seasons, and so should a garden center. This is a great opportunity to revitalize your store at a minimum of every three months and up to six times a year—Winter, Early Spring, Spring, Summer, Autumn (Fall) and Christmas.

Creating Interactive Experiences

Experiences are based on emotions. Touch, smell, sound and taste all add to the customer's experience. This is where coffee shops and wi-fi workstations have come into their own to encourage customers to linger longer in the garden center.

Create workshops in the coffee shop combining food and plants. A "Garden to Plate" workshop would combine planting herbs and vegetables with the preparation and cooking and a sampling of the finished dish to share the experience with the customer's palate.
Alternatively, a space can be claimed as "The Garden School."

Anticipation Signage

Storytelling in retail is like magic dust. Using anticipation signage, sellers can tie together what it is, how it is used and how much it will cost, and "magically," the anticipation of owning (not buying) rises. As little as one word will sell more related products because it creates anticipation. UK-based retailer Marks & Spencer does this exceptionally well.

When it comes to merchandising, don't just sell the product; inspire with "Take and Make" kits. This allows you to bundle products as well as remove the price sensitivity, as customers cannot price compare easily.

Personalize the Journey with Technology

In a previous article we explored how AI can personalize the experience for customers. Clothing stores are now using smart mirrors to achieve this objective.

Customers will also be looking for Instagrammable moments where they can record and share where they are. Have these located around the store and make sure your name is visible at the location and in the photograph. Refresh these seasonally so there is always a new reason to snap and share.

Employ Team Members with Personality

You can create a paradise for the consumer, but people buy from people, and the team performance makes a bigger difference to the average sale per customer than the store or the product itself can.

It is a challenge putting the right team together—which is precisely why it is so important to separating yourself from your competition. The consumer expects a plant guru, a plant doctor and engaging personal service, all from the same person. To build the right team you must care for them as if they're the defining difference that they will become. There are no shortcuts here, but if there were, it would be guiding them into becoming who they will be.

The "Go-To" Garden Center

Your aim should be to be the local "Go-To" garden center. This means engaging with suppliers to launch new releases at your store, hosting garden classes (yes, they are still popular, but you need to get your topics right) and having live demonstrations (for example, showing customers how to build a garden project in a weekend).

Engaging with the local community may also include hosting your own art festival, farmers' market, car show or other community-based event.

Accept the Future

Consumers are splitting into two groups. One group will always want to go to a grid layout store and pick up plants from benches based on price. The other group is seeking an experience. They want their journey to be meaningful.

The box stores are catering to the first group exceptionally well, which is why independent garden centers need to focus on the second group of customers. Provide a memorable experience and your customers will come back … with their friends. **GP**

You can reach the authors at the following emails: John Stanley at info@johnstanley.com.au; Sid Raisch at sid@advantagedevelopment.ai; and Dries Jansen at info@gardencenteradvice.com.

Correction

We appreciate your feedback! In article one, we mentioned that the first garden center was developed in 1955. David Green, owner of Primex Garden Center in Pennsylvania, reminded us that his grandfather first opened their family business in 1943, and David and his family continue to operate it.