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Guest Column

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Creating, and Sticking With, a Plan

Sarah Beach

I'm Sarah Beach, owner of Sunshine Garden Center in Diamond, Illinois. I've been leading the family business since 2008, and through that time, have changed business models, offerings and revenue streams. From economic downturns to road construction to natural disasters and a pandemic, planning, adjusting, re-evaluating and assessing have become crucial to growing and staying relevant. Knowing where you're heading makes it easier to pivot through life's challenges while staying on course.

Most of us know what sold well and what didn't this spring, but to take a big-picture view of your business and plan for it as a whole, you can't plan for just what's on the benches. Do you go to the shows and just look for anything that can fill your benches and shelves? With the world and the way people shop changing faster, everything you bring in needs a purpose, and the way you present it needs to be an experience. How do you know what the right thing is or which direction to take without a crystal ball?

You pay attention to your customers and their trends, and then you plan. You look at the business as a whole and you create a layered plan where everything touches something else in the business. You look for hidden opportunities to cross-promote, cross-merchandise and cross-market. Everything you bring in should be tied to something else so as you market it you can tie it back to a class, your website or a social media promotion—something to keep people in your world.

How to Get Started

First, do a thorough survey. Start with the obvious: what went well and what you need to improve. Then go through each department, looking for missed opportunities, ways to improve and things that really stand out. Ask your sales team on the floor what's missing or what people are loving this year. Don't forget to factor in if you're planning a large capital improvement project or small refreshes that you need to get done. Write down any changes or additions to the daily workflow, too. Looking to add a new revenue stream to the mix? Put that down, too. Think of it as a massive brain dump where anything and everything, big and small, gets written down. You want everything about your business goals and vision in one place.

Now that you have your notes all in one place, look for trends and start organizing. I've done this process multiple times over the years and it can look like a notebook filled with ideas, a wall covered in Post-its or even a leftover piece of polycarbonate from the greenhouse used for a massive mind map. No matter how you organize this information, it's important to lay it all out so that you and your team can see a tangible, big-picture view of the business. Start by grouping areas together that would work well together if partnered—new plant requests and a greenhouse refresh. Do you have traffic flow issues or holes in your marketing that hinder the sales of your hottest items? What about classes and events—are they something that you should add or alter? Anything and everything related to the growth and health of your business goes in the plan.

Putting it All Together

Take a step back and really look at everything you poured out. This is your master plan and guiding point on what's working/not working and the direction you're headed. This right here is where the magic happens. Soak it in, friends. Now the hard part: how to make sense of all this information. If this was overwhelming for you, you're not alone and don't let it discourage you. Do you see repeat themes across multiple categories or overlapping opportunities? Start with small tweaks that you can do easily—a new coat of paint, a new benching layout, one extra piece of marketing. As you take the small tasks off the board, they naturally snowball into bigger tasks and projects, but laying out the overwhelming big picture shows you the path so that all the small things are still leading in the same direction. The goal is that every project, every buying decision, every piece of marketing or new promotion goes back to the original plan and works as one cohesive movement—not every department for themselves and hoping that you all get to the same end spot.

This process looks different for every business and how you approach it should be different, as well. We're all in the same industry, but we're all very different businesses. Some might have more cash flow to work with; others are trying to figure out how to get through this week's payroll. Established businesses may find themselves in a position to rebrand while a new business is still building its loyal customer base. There's no wrong stage to be in for this process, but being honest with yourself about where you are and what you can actually do in your current situation will help keep you on the path with manageable expectations. How much can you spend on a new line or fixtures? Do you need better software to track your numbers? Can you reduce your risk on a new line by rolling out a class or by partnering with another business for a pop-up? What do you have lying around that can get repurposed?

Spending the time on creating the plan gives you a bird's-eye view of where you're heading. Use it as a road map for moving forward. Refer back to it as you go to the shows and walk the aisles. Lean into it with community opportunities and business partnerships. Let it help you find layering opportunities within the business that you might have missed before. Make it a master plan for the staff to follow, too, or if you're a solo business owner, let it guide you on the hard days. There will be things that come up and/or outside factors you can't control, but doing this work allows you to pivot your actions without totally derailing the process. **GP**

Sarah Beach is the second-generation owner of Sunshine Garden Center in Diamond, Illinois. She can be reached at sarah@sunshinegardencenter.com.