

Features

9/30/2026

Engaging Consumers IRL

LaManda Joy



Recent consumer research suggests that face-to-face interaction remains one of the most powerful trust-building tools available to brands. In Freeman's 2023 Trust Report, 77% of consumers said they trusted a brand more after interacting with it at a live event.

The Crescent team at the Northwest Flower & Garden Festival last spring.

And yet, the garden industry, like every other retail sector, has faced growing pressure to compete in an increasingly digital world. Social media, e-commerce and online marketing have reshaped how brands reach consumers, as many independent garden centers worried about staying visible to younger shoppers who increasingly discover products and communities online.

And we're living with the consequences of the doom-scrolling culture we've created: signs of digital fatigue are becoming harder to ignore. Consumers are increasingly seeking more tactile and community-centered experiences, creating new opportunities for garden retailers and brands to lean into one of the industry's greatest strengths: real-world experiences that engage all the senses.

Creating Meaningful Connections

For Paula Douer of Crescent Garden, live events have proven to be less about simple product exposure and more about creating memorable brand experiences. She said in-person events allow consumers to physically interact with products in ways that online marketing cannot, particularly for premium or design-focused items where texture, scale and quality matter.

Crescent also uses live events to strengthen relationships with retail partners, including IGCs participating in or attending shows. Rather than relying solely on booth traffic, the company has increasingly leaned into seminars, sponsorships and integrated event participation to create multiple points of interaction throughout the show experience.

Paula noted that live events can also create valuable team-building and training opportunities, particularly as more employees work remotely or have limited direct interaction with consumers during their normal day-to-day responsibilities.

When Justin Hancock owned his own IGC, he saw firsthand how live events could expose businesses to audiences beyond traditional gardeners. He recalled participating in a local arts festival where building a temporary garden helped raise awareness among attendees who may not otherwise have visited a garden center or even knew his garden center existed.

Now with Costa Farms, Hancock said live events have become even more important opportunities to connect directly with consumers. Speaking about the company's experience at PlantCon, he said in-person engagement reminds attendees there are passionate people behind the plants, products and brands they encounter online.

"Everybody talks about what they're excited about or what their pain points are," Justin said. "You hear it in a way that you don't get out of consumer research or reports."

He added that live events can also be valuable learning environments for employees who rarely interact directly with end consumers, giving teams more immediate insight into customer interests, frustrations and buying behavior.



Seeing the Bigger Picture

For Daven Brodess of Garden Guru Tools, participating in the Northwest Flower & Garden Festival did more than generate sales. It helped reshape the company's business strategy. Daven said direct interaction with attendees revealed that customers often responded more strongly to the ergonomics and durability of his products than to messaging that had performed well online.

[MyPatioTree.com](https://www.mypatootree.com) was in a high-traffic area at the Philadelphia Flower Show, giving away 10,000 stickers and raising visibility for its new direct-to-consumer patio tree program.

The experience increased Daven's appreciation for face-to-face merchandising opportunities and the potential of in-store retail environments. As a result, Garden Guru has begun expanding wholesale efforts and developing relationships with independent garden centers.

He said live events create a unique environment where brands can test ideas, observe customer behavior firsthand and refine how they present products both online and in physical retail settings.

For Chris Robinson of [MyPatioTree.com](https://www.mypatootree.com), the Philadelphia Flower Show served as a high-visibility launch platform for the company's new direct-to-consumer patio tree brand. Chris saw the event as an opportunity to rapidly build awareness and introduce the brand to a large East Coast consumer audience after experiencing the West Coast vibe of NW Flower & Garden Festival the week before.

The show's massive attendance created repeated exposure opportunities for the young brand throughout the 10-day event. Attendees left with more than 10,000 [MyPatioTree.com](https://www.mypatootree.com) stickers, creating thousands of small physical reminders future customers could take home and revisit later when buying season arrived.

The company also collected thousands of email addresses through a giveaway, allowing [MyPatioTree.com](https://www.mypatio.com) to continue building relationships long after the show ended. Chris said the countless conversations that took place during the event also helped refine the company's FAQs, taglines and educational messaging, creating more "battle-tested" language the brand could continue using across future marketing efforts.

For Chris, the experience demonstrated how live events can accelerate brand awareness while also helping young companies sharpen their messaging, build customer relationships and create longer-term marketing momentum through follow-up communication and repeat customer touch points.

Connecting at the Garden Center

Not every garden retailer has access to a major consumer flower show and many independent garden centers are creating their own event-driven experiences locally. Hicks Nurseries on Long Island has built a strong following around seasonal programming and special events, while Oregon-based Bauman's Farm & Garden draws large crowds annually for its GardenPalooza celebration.

For many IGCs, smaller in-house events can offer many of the same benefits discussed by exhibitors at larger shows, including community connection, customer education and repeat engagement. They can also create valuable partnership opportunities with suppliers and plant brands looking for more direct ways to interact with consumers at the local level.

For Carla Daniels, Western Territory Sales Manager for Espoma, retailer-hosted events offer "the best of both worlds." Espoma regularly participates in events hosted by IGC partners, including Hicks Nurseries and Bauman's Farm & Garden, giving the brand an opportunity to support dealers while connecting directly with the gardeners they serve.

Carla said those events allow her to answer product questions, hear success stories and better understand how consumers are actually using Espoma products. Just as importantly, showing up is a tangible way to thank retailers for supporting the brand.

"Ultimately, it's just how can I support the dealer," she said. For IGCs creating their own events, supplier participation can add expertise and energy to the experience while strengthening the relationships among retailer, brand and customer.

As businesses begin planning their 2027 marketing budgets, live events may warrant a different kind of evaluation than simple lead counts or immediate sales totals. Many exhibitors and retailers say the real value often unfolds over time through repeated touchpoints, stronger partnerships, improved messaging, customer trust and long-term brand recognition.

In an era increasingly dominated by algorithms, scrolling and digital noise, in-person experiences also offer something harder to quantify on a spreadsheet, but equally important: genuine human connection. Whether through major flower or plant shows, supplier partnerships or locally hosted garden center events, businesses across the industry are finding that consumers respond powerfully to experiences that feel tactile, communal and real.

And in a marketplace where attention is fragmented and loyalty can feel fleeting, creating those moments of connection may be one of the most valuable investments a business can make. Beyond immediate sales opportunities, live events give brands and retailers a chance to build trust, create lasting memories and develop the

kinds of lifelong customer relationships that continue to grow long after the event itself ends. **GP**

LaManda Joy is a gardening educator, author and speaker, as well as co-founder of Simple Spring, a gardening consumer research company and co-founder of The Great Grow Along, a digital platform for gardening education.