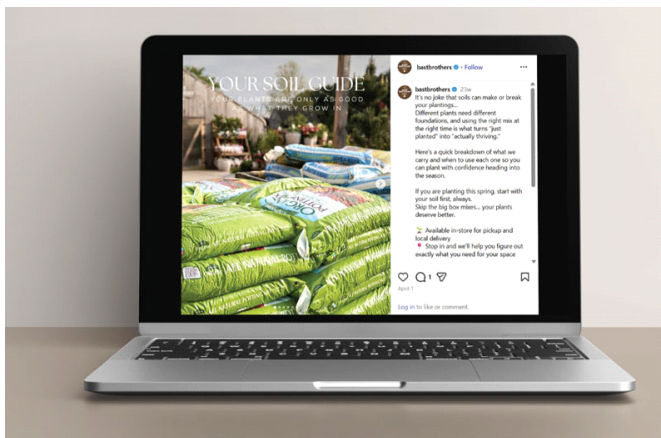


Cover Story

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Creating Loyalty With Quality

Jennifer Polanz



It wasn't long in my own gardening journey that I realized just how important a quality growing media was, and how it could really impact what I was growing in containers and in the ground. When customers are coming in to the garden center for their purchases, whether in the spring or coming back in the fall, soils are a natural addition to the cart, and if they're experienced, they likely already know what they want. I asked a supplier and a garden center retailer about how they think soils fit into attracting more repeat visits and building customer loyalty.

An example of how social media posts can educate and build trust.

Mike Huber, who's the territory sales manager for the Mid-Atlantic region for The Espoma Company, has seen retail partners carry Espoma products for decades now (the company is approaching 100 years old) and experience the loyalty that comes from generations using the product. He also noted how quickly gardener recommendations can travel to help build loyalty.

"Gardeners trust other gardeners. We're fortunate to hear from consumers across the country who are searching for a particular Espoma soil because they saw a gardening content creator use it, someone recommended it in a gardening group or they saw another gardener getting great results with it," he said. "People want to use the products they've seen work for people they trust.

"That creates a real opportunity for independent garden centers. When our retailers let their customers know, especially through social media, that they carry Espoma soils, we've seen gardeners drive hours to stock up. That level of brand loyalty still surprises us sometimes, but it also thrills us."



“It’s What We Use”

There’s really nothing more powerful than telling customers they’re getting the same soil that’s being used to grow the beautiful plants they’re purchasing. Ian Hoen, co-owner of Hoen’s Garden Center (pronounced Haynes) in Holland, Ohio, attributes their success in part to their Lambert sales representative, Eric Stallkamp. Eric and Ian’s late father, Bob, were good friends, and when Eric switched companies to rep Lambert, Hoen’s switched their growing media to Lambert, too. They grow most of their own material and also carry many of the Lambert retail products, so they

can effectively tell customers “this is what we use.”

The team at Babylon Landscapes in Nashville, Tennessee, after a Product Knowledge Training session with Bonnie Satterthwaite of The Espoma Company.

“When we switched to Lambert [for growing] and saw they had a great retail line full of all the soils we went full on and switched over,” said Ian, who added prior to that they were selling soils that were found in the box stores.

“That’s definitely a good selling point, which we use often, that this is what we grow in.”

You don’t have to have your own growing facility to be able to say that, though. Offering samples to employees so they understand the products is a great way to get your sales team behind whatever product you’re carrying.



Mike said garden centers can use education and personal recommendations to build trust with customers.

“One of the most effective things a retailer can do is show customers what its own team uses,” he said.

“When a garden center identifies an Espoma product as a staff favorite, uses it in a demonstration or features it in a care-tip video, that recommendation feels authentic. Customers trust the people at their local

garden center, especially when those employees have firsthand experience with the products.”

The potting mix offerings at the cash registers at Hoen’s Garden Center in Holland, Ohio.

Reinforcing With In-Store Events

Ian said educational events and workshops help them to reinforce the products they carry, and whenever they do workshops they always have the right soil mix for the job front and center to show customers what they’ll need to be successful. This is also a great way to show new gardeners looking to learn just how important that soil mix is.

“A lot of people have no idea where to begin when it comes to repotting,” Ian said as an example. “So anytime we are doing workshops we’re promoting the right type of soil to use. It’s more natural to see the results of the things we grow. They see the results and want to know how we’re getting there.”

Along with educating new gardeners, Ian said they see experienced gardeners coming back to grab the same mixes

over and over.

“We even have people that will buy the smaller stuff, like a bag of perlite, Lambert Orchid Mix and charcoal and make their own coarser potting mix on their own,” he said.

Mike said Espoma’s goal is to be a partner with independent retailers, not just a vendor who sells products to them. To that end, their sales team is often out at garden centers providing product knowledge training, merchandising support and lots more.

“Our dedicated sales team works closely with independent garden centers every day and conducts hundreds of product knowledge presentations each year,” he said. “Those relationships also give us an opportunity to learn what retailers are seeing firsthand.”



Online Presence

Remember when we talked about gardeners listening to gardeners? Espoma is one of the brands that has really taken that to heart and they’ve done it because they know the way consumers gather information has changed. Before customers set foot in a store, many of them have already watched videos, checked reviews or followed garden creators online, Mike said. But sometimes that information isn’t timely or accurate, which can be confusing. It’s important for both suppliers and retailers to have channels that customers can tune into and trust, and work with content creators who are knowledgeable about their products.

“A gardener can now watch a garden center employee demonstrate a product, follow a creator through an entire growing season or see another gardener document results in their own backyard,” he said. “We regularly hear from customers who discovered Espoma or decided to try a product after seeing someone they trust use it online, whether that’s a gardening creator or their local garden center.

Mike Huber conducting a PK training at an Ace Cool Hardware store chain around the Washington, D.C., area.

“When customers share their successes, they become advocates for the products that helped them along with way. Social media simply gives those experiences a much larger audience.”

Simplifying the Offering

Oftentimes working with a trusted supplier can help simplify the product mix to make it easier on both employees and customers. When Ian said they were carrying potting mix that was in the box stores, they were also carrying some different random soils from a variety of companies over the years. Once they switched over to Lambert, they were able to streamline the product offerings to a nice selection of mixes for a variety of needs, like Lambert Seed & Cutting Mix, Cactus & Succulent Mix, Orchids Mix, African Violet Mix and others, along with the larger, 3 cu. ft. Complete Lambert’s Potting Mix.

When it comes to displays, they offer up to 10 different kinds of the smaller, specialty bags in front of each section of registers (in peak spring they have six registers total, in groups of two). They have the larger bags up front near the registers when approaching from the annuals area, as well as some near the shopping carts. Hoen’s also offers the option to tell the employee at the register and drive around to a loading area to have it loaded into the vehicle.

In the end, it comes down to ease of selection, and providing a clear, trustworthy choice to provide success for consumers, ensuring they come back year after year.

“Gardening has changed tremendously over the past century, and the way consumers discover and shop for products continues to evolve,” Mike noted. “But the foundation of loyalty hasn’t changed very much—give people a good experience, help them succeed and be there when they come back next season.” **GP**