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When Retailers Zig, You Zag

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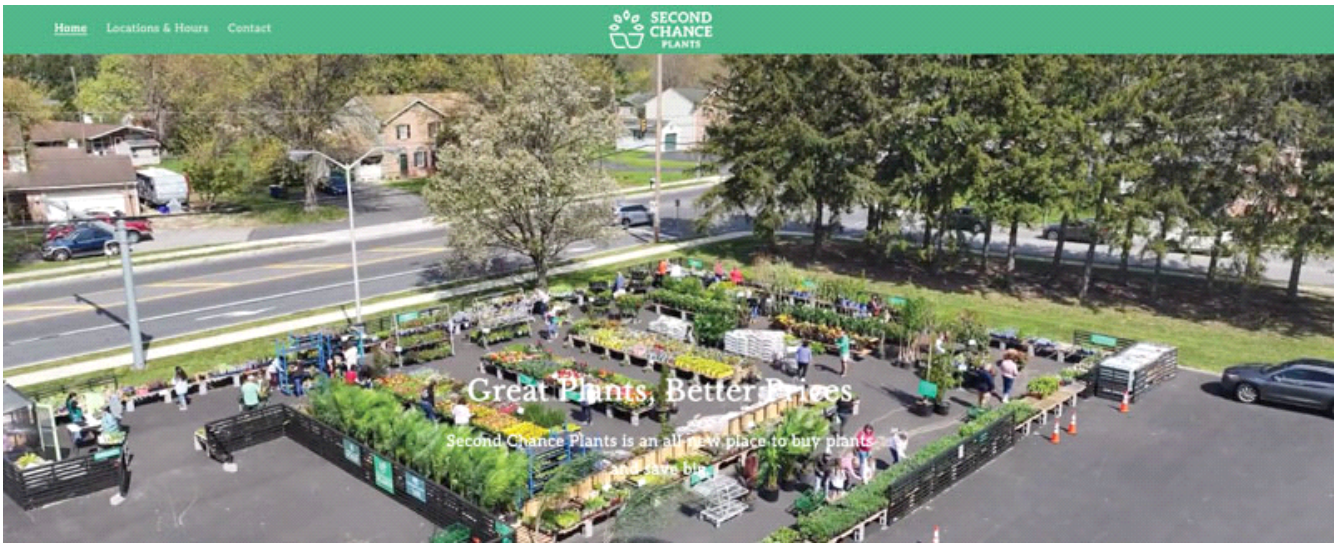
Marketing is both experiential and experimental. In a fast-moving market, successful retailers survive by constantly Zagging into new concepts while others stand still. Take food service, the most innovative retail sector of all. Because it's fast and relatively easy to experiment, chefs are always testing new ideas to find their next niche. Food trends inevitably lead store retail, with fashion following closely behind, as the next most experimental industry. Garden retail, by contrast, tends to lag at best and is usually uninspiring. But it doesn't have to be this way.

The first urgent shift requires embracing the modern consumer. Omnichannel retail is here to stay across all commercial segments. While garden retailers are adapting, they're doing so very slowly. This is a critical place to Zig quickly. If you don't meet consumers online, your otherwise loyal customers will divide their in-store shopping among your competitors. Worse, they might abandon you entirely if buy online, pickup in store (BOPIS) or home delivery are missing. If you haven't embraced omnichannel, Zig over to it immediately. If you already have, ensure your entire e-commerce technology platform is fully up to date.

However, once the rest of the industry has Zigged over to omnichannel, you must Zag to truly stand out. To keep loyal customers and attract new ones, we must look to the broader retail landscape for clues. The traditional enclosed shopping mall of the 1980s has fundamentally changed and redeveloped into retail lifestyle centers, including residential housing, outdoor accessed retail, and fast and casual food service.



An example of a Second Chance Plants location, as shown on their website.

Enclosed mall shoppers experience multiple stores in a single trip and now must travel farther to do so. Far fewer of them exist today. However, the amount of merchandise they want to lug home is limited, as is their patience for tedious shopping trips. In response, the outdoor “lifestyle center” has fully emerged, replacing aged-out, mid-century shopping centers. Today, developers integrate these lifestyle hubs directly into new and re-imagined residential housing developments.

Garden retail has historically been a standalone, land-intensive concept, but the future belongs to those who adapt and Zag. For example, Petitti Garden Centers has Zagged successfully by taking up residence in several converted shopping center lifestyle centers. These spaces come with built-in advantages: expansive shared parking lots, ready-made infrastructure and existing zoning. The developer handles the heavy redevelopment lifting, leaving the retailer to focus purely on the garden retail experience.

Another powerful Zag is the evolution of the temporary retail space. Pop-up garden centers have existed for decades, usually found on unused sections of otherwise busy parking lots that are normally only used during the Christmas holiday rush. It’s a proven, highly successful concept. While prime grocery store out-lots are difficult to secure, spaces abound where local regulations permit seasonal retail.

As an example, “Second Chance Plants,” is a Zag concept that capitalizes on the prime spring selling season. They opened three temporary locations in the Baltimore area in the spring of 2025 and rapidly expanded to 12 locations for spring 2026. Their model touts overstock plants at up to 50% off box store prices and focuses strictly on fast-turning annuals, vegetable starts, herbs and perennials during a tight eight-to-12-week window. They consistently sell out between restocks. Crucially, this concept increases plant availability at the exact peak of the market, catching consumers who may be frustrated when long checkout lines and overflowing parking lots overwhelm garden retailers and big box stores, or just respond to the convenience of finding them when they shop in other nearby stores.

So how will you Zag? Innovation isn’t limited to traditional pathways. The future belongs to the experimental. Stop lagging behind food and fashion. Find your unique Zag, creating an unforgettable experience. **GP**

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