

Features

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That New Store Smell

Ellen C. Wells

A new garden center is sexy, isn't it? All that glass, shiny metal framing, the spotlessly clean covered retail space and even the freshly paved parking lot are just so alluring. The "new garden center smell" is better than the first whiff of mulch in spring. However, there are A LOT of processes involved to take an empty lot or old garden center from essentially nothing to a horticultural destination. To the folks involved in retail building construction and those who have undergone the process the consensus is unanimous: It ain't pretty, but it's sure worth the effort.

Chuck Sierke, national sales manager for garden center and greenhouse manufacturer Deforche Construct, has seen the building process play out with dozens of garden center clients. "Most folks do [new construction] once, maybe twice in their lifetime," he commented. "How do they know all they need to know? They don't. There are so many things that are going to pop up."

That's why Chuck uses a checklist developed over the years to help guide folks through what needs to be done. The list covers everything from state and local permits and zonal approvals to electrical, fire safety and ADA compliance matters. Each list item also includes who is responsible for its completion (hint: It's not all one person).

Beyond the checklist, however, is a layer of advice from Chuck that will help the overall planning and build process proceed with a clearer vision and fewer hiccups.

Call local building authorities. Understand what is allowed regarding zoning and other restrictions.

Hire a contractor. A reliable contractor, overseeing the bevy of subcontractors, is able to check items off that master list because they're familiar with the process. "Everybody thinks, 'Oh, well, I can do all that stuff myself and I'll save a bunch of money,'" Chuck says. "I challenge that because one mistake would have paid for the services of a professional—and then some."

Start early. Upwards of 1½ to 2 years before planning to open, Chuck says. Delays can pop up anywhere along the way—from neighborhood planning boards and architectural commissions to unforeseen building issues and storms.

Don't cut corners. "You're building a profit center," Chuck says. "This is where people go to spend their money. The nicer something is, the longer customers will be in the store, and the more purchases they will have. Don't let the small things get in the way of the big picture."

Consider a Phase II. Speaking of bigger picture, there's no time like the present to literally lay the groundwork for a future expansion. Preparing for future electrical and plumbing lines, for example, can make the next phase of building faster and cheaper.

Consider a product line or service expansion. In this current build-out, is there room for including a new-to-you product line or service that could bring in extra income?

Utilize standard sizes. Custom sizes for greenhouse materials can mean added expenses. Try to work within the parameters used by greenhouse manufacturers to both keep costs lower and to ensure timely production.

Lurvey's Experience

Lurvey Garden Center and Landscape Supply in Des Plaines, Illinois, is one company that prepared for a new build years in advance. They opened a new retail center in March 2016, about five years after completing a building for the wholesale portion of the company. According Scott Goczowski, general manager for the home and garden department, planning for the store actually started with the planning of the wholesale building. "We put on the original PUD (planned unit development) that we were going to expand the retail portion of our business at some point," Scott says, the first step in getting the square footage of the new building approved by the city. When planning for the new building got underway, Lurvey's kept the retail square footage, but changed the new building's location. Back to the city they went with a revised PUD, which was accepted since the square footage wasn't changed. Getting that head start by planning for a Phase II helped.

Down-and-dirty planning for the new building began in July 2014, with the first step being signing on with an architect—the same firm who designed the wholesale building. By July 2015 the previous retail space had met all the requirements for demolition; e.g., asbestos testing and removal, utilities disconnected and equipment removed, and so on. Before the final demolition Lurvey's even let the local fire department use the facility for training purposes.

What was the surprising part of all that came afterward? "To be honest," Scott says, "when we were interviewing general contractors, the main thing was we need to start the process right after June and we needed to be open for the next spring. So it was interesting to me when we interviewed several people and they said they couldn't do it." Turns out the contractor they hired came into the interview with a different way to construct the building, allowing the work to continue with few interruptions. "He came in with a plan and said he'd have us open March 1, and we were actually open to the public March 21."

Along with a new building came a new way of new of doing business. "I don't want to say we changed our business model but we knew we couldn't continue down what I'd call a traditional garden center business path," Scott says. They planned the new building to encourage year-round traffic flow. There's a fireplace with couches, a coffee bar and conference room. "It's a showroom that our contractors can use as well so they

send their customers in to us,” Scott explained. “Our wholesale business is the biggest part of our revenue, so we’re trying to tap into that but still be the face of the company to the public.”

The lessons they’ve learned from the building process are many. First, you’ll definitely go over budget. Something unexpected—like hitting an underground creek—can lead to unplanned expenses. Second, choosing the right architect and contractor are key. Work with folks who understand your vision and goals, and who can keep you and the whole team on schedule.

Is all the effort of building a new facility worth it? The numbers indicate yes. Scott says they were up about 27% and this year they’re hovering just below 10% over last year. “We’re about 30-100 extra tickets a day compared to our previous building,” he says. Seems like building was the right decision for them. **GP**