

Features

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Successful Events: Process, Places, People

Katie Elzer-Peters

In the run-up to the holidays, two garden centers with robust event and workshop schedules have opened their doors to show you how to create memorable experiences that help your bottom line without fully depleting your staff.

Homestead Gardens is a large destination garden center in the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area. Hyannis Country Gardens is a large, multi-generational, family-run garden center in Cape Cod. (Where resident “plant geek” and frequent event presenter C.L. Fornari says, “Within a 25 mile radius of the garden center most of our potential customers are fish.”) In other words, the two retailers have different situations, in terms of potential foot traffic. Both, however, run a successful combination of holiday-themed, educational and entertainment-focused events. You can, too. Here’s how.

Surprise and Delight

Chris Leveille, the Retail General Manager at Homestead Gardens, shares some wins from last year’s Fall Fest, a six-week event that runs from late September through October. (Every weekend features different entertainment and educational programs.)

“2017 was our best-attended festival ever,” he says. “We intentionally set out to be a highly photographic-driven festival because that’s what’s happening out in the world. Everything’s about the photo.” They had a snapchat filter and a hashtag, #hgfallfest, and 12 different photo ops.



Chris looks to two places for inspiration: large music festival events and Disney World, where visitors experience over-the-top, thematically coordinated moments.

“Decide what your theme is and then focus on replicating the look and feel throughout so that the experience is consistent throughout the property,” he said. Their 2017 theme was sunflowers and even the Snapchat

filter incorporated the motif.

Pictured: Homestead Gardens set up photo ops, like these sunflowers, at its Fall Fest and created a Snapchat filter with a sunflower for guests to use to post their fun-filled afternoons.

Before the festival opened, the Homestead team deliberately posted pictures of various “moments” and areas to build excitement. Once visitors started snapping and posting, attendance grew. Chris cautions us to think about scale when creating those building photo ops. “When you get 15 people crowded around something it starts to look small,” he warns.



Sweat the Small Stuff

Your event *actually* starts the minute a potential attendee looks at the registration page or sees your marketing posters or banners. Maintaining a cohesive presence throughout the experience, from first touch point through the moment a visitor departs your parking lot, is essential. You also have to deliver the experience you *promise* in your marketing materials.

“We play music around the ticket booths and the first photo op is actually outside the gates,” Chris said. Multiple ticket lanes help them move visitors efficiently through the entry gates. “Do pay attention to the little details. Something that you cut a corner on might be what the visitor remembers—and not in a good way.”

Divide and Conquer

Outline clear expectations for staff: Chris insists the experience is all in the people working the event. He recalls a story often told by the Disney Institute, most recently in an article on the Harvard Business Review website (HBR.org), about the importance of the people working at attractions.

“When you’re on the Jungle Cruise, the ‘skipper’ has to act surprised every time the alligator jumps out of the water. If he or she doesn’t, part of the magic is lost,” Chris said.

In the HBR article, Disney cites the importance of process, place and people working together to create a seamless experience. When they plan the Fall Fest and other large events, every single position has a job description, from the ticket sellers to the person driving the tractor.

Provide support: C.L. Fornari from Hyannis Country Gardens said, “It’s essential that the people responsible for putting on the events have the backing and support of the rest of the staff. If they need someone to help set up chairs, they get the help to set up chairs.”

Capitalize on Excitement and Urgency

Give coupons: C.L. says that Hyannis Country Gardens charges \$5 for in-house lecture programs, but gives attendees a one-day \$5 coupon. Homestead also gives a one-day coupon to educational event participants, as well, to help meet per-person revenue goals. C.L. notes that once people have attended a workshop, they feel more empowered to keep going and working on projects at home and are then more motivated to shop.



Sell the samples: Hyannis Country Gardens does a Christmas open house each year the Friday night of the weekend before Thanksgiving. “It gives us a deadline to have the store in tip-top shape,” C.L. said. This event has evolved from a Saturday morning open house with demonstrations to a more activity-based “make-and-take” event. “Before, people would sit and listen to presentations for two hours, enjoy refreshments and go home.”

Pictured: Homestead Gardens has Fall Fest guests exit through the “gift shop” tent filled with treats and fall decorations.

Now attendees meander through stations where they can create a swag, decorate a wreath or make a living ornament.

“Customers pay for the items they want to make and take their ticket to the station,” she said. “We always have samples to sell (with a price attached) available as well so that the cashiers don’t have to hunt for the price.”

“Exit through the gift shop:” At Homestead Gardens, they capitalize on visitor excitement by directing exit foot traffic through a merchandise tent filled with pumpkins, fall foods, mini straw bales and more. “They can basically pick up fall as they’re leaving,” Chris said.

Measure and Follow Up

Use online registration to build your email list and follow up after the event. “We do pretty detailed surveys between 24 to 48 hours after our educational events, digging in to everything from seating arrangements to food to programming questions,” said Chris. They review the results, look at the per-person revenue (to see if it met their stated goals) and refine.

C.L. begins every workshop by asking the audience to raise their hands if they’ve been to the garden center before, asks how they heard about the event and then gives them a verbal tour, letting them know what they can expect when they come back—such as tables full of blooming annuals. She also passes around a clipboard so people can sign up for the newsletter.

After the event, keep the excitement going by recapping and sharing photos on social media and via the email newsletter. Maintain your momentum and connection with customers, new and existing, so they’ll be excited for both the next event and the day-to-day activities and services you offer. **GP**

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