

Lesson 22: GARDEN CENTER BASICS

Business Guide

Segment One - Sales

The retail garden center is a dynamic, challenging, ever evolving business. Since the concept came into the mainstream in the 1950's, the role of the retail garden center has expanded far beyond its traditional lawn and garden foundations. The expectations of consumers are rising as their options increase. Both the quality and quantity of competition is growing. These factors are driving the evolution of the retail garden center.

The successful garden center employee needs to understand and have certain basic skills in areas including sales, customer service, employee fundamentals, marketing, merchandising, safety and maintenance. And, of course, garden center employees must know how to care for plants!

First impressions in selling are always important, often lasting years. A better understanding of your customer's needs will result in more involvement by your client and make the sale more enjoyable for both of you. Many times a customer will not want to be bothered for fear of the pushy salesman, but you should always make them aware that you are available at any time, if needed. Enthusiasm is the best tool any salesman can have. It is imperative that you have a knowledge and understanding of the product's features and benefits. You need to have the ability to guide the customer and effectively assist them in making the decision to purchase.

Try to keep the conversation positive. The way you phrase a question, the tone of voice used and body language can affect the response of the customer. People will trust their eyes before they trust your words. Exploring the customer's needs is not always simply uncovering their needs and plugging in the appropriate answer. It may also mean exploring other possibilities that the customer may not have considered. For example, a homeowner may have a limited view of what could work for their situation. Part of being a professional is to offer possibilities that would be better and may include upgrading the sale. Related products, sometimes called tie-ins, can enhance the overall sale as well as the customer's results and satisfaction. For example, if you have just sold a plant, suggest the right fertilizer for that plant. You should always be looking for ways to make your product perform better for the customer. People are not just looking for a product, but an experience. Go above and beyond what the industry is doing, or what is expected of you. Say thank you - often!

Segment Two – Customer Service

Customer service in a retail garden center takes many forms. The simplest things such as paved parking, shopping carts, information sheets, gift wrapping or delivery service are customer services that will be prioritized differently by each customer. While the customer with a truck may not care about delivery, the customer in the Saab, but all are important that needs a 3” caliper tree is very interested in this particular customer service. Every business must study its customers to decide whether or not a particular service is needed. When the decision is made to provide a service, it must be first rate or nothing at all. Get the right information about your customer to make these decisions and you will be able to provide excellent customer service and in a cost effective manner. Things to consider include surveys, weekend reports by all staff, reviewing addresses and signatures on checks and credit cards and periodic notes on observations in the parking lot and in the store.

Be sure that the service you provide is useful. This can apply to many aspects of garden centers, but the selection of shopping carts is a perfect example. Shopping carts need to be large enough for most customers to be able to load a good quantity of product to take to the cashier, while being maneuverable enough to move effectively through your aisles. Make the wrong decision and you have big heavy carts sitting idle or you have customers with 2 or 3 carts pulled up to the register. Different businesses need different sizes and quantities of carts to satisfy customer needs.

By providing useful and excellent services, your garden center will develop and cultivate longstanding relationships with loyal customers, who will return again and again for not only a quality product but for quality service.

Segment Three - Marketing

Marketing is critical in any retail business. It establishes a garden center’s style of business and identifies the selection of products. Successful garden centers have approached this in many ways; some as discounts offered with volume sales, others offering high quality, specialty plants and accessories. The first step in developing an effective marketing plan is to decide the focal point in your business. Generally, companies choose to market themselves by promoting either what they are already known for or what they would like to be known for. In any case, planning is the key.

It is necessary for a business to have a budget. You need this to determine your expectations in sales and the percentage that you will devote to marketing. Typically a business will spend from 2-5% of their yearly sales on advertising (an important component of marketing). The percent can vary based on how aggressive your budget is, and how comfortable you are in producing the sales you project.

A marketing program should be planned for the entire business year. One key element in your marketing plan should be “special events.” A garden center business is characterized by seasonal variety. Sales volume and products sold vary from month to month. The goal is to maintain traffic in the garden center year round, including winter. Each month offers opportunities for promotions. Buy a twelve-month planner and mark your promotions for the year. Of course this kind of scheduling can also be done on the computer. Use holidays and high points of a garden center’s season to help in picking the dates. It will help you plan your weekends and activities, and also will help you decide how to allocate the dollars included in your marketing budget.

Research the media market to find which options might work the best in your location. Find out which media market reaches the largest audience for your business. Television, radio, newspaper ads, direct mail and the internet and social media are all outlets to consider. Every market is different; what works in one area may not be effective in another. An example might be that one area has a very dominant radio station, but in another, newspaper or TV might be the best option. Consider what audience you want to reach - this will help in picking the right media. No business can afford to do everything, so you need to determine the best mix for your business and stay focused on what works. If one media does not work, research and try another.

Segment Four - Merchandising

Merchandising, by its simplest definition, is how the products we are trying to sell are presented to the consumer. More specifically, it is also the context in which the products are presented, or displayed. There are several styles of merchandising that can be successfully used by a retail garden center. Often more than one style can be used. It is important though, to have one dominant style that carries throughout the store. This dominant style must be consistent with the overall marketing plan.

Lighting

The type of lighting has an impact on how your customers perceive your store and the products you carry. It should be obvious that the lighting be strong enough that customers can read labels and signs without difficulty. There are other considerations, however. Because color is such an integral part of our business, it is important that the lighting being used does not affect the colors seen by the customer. Some types of lighting will cause colors to appear washed out or even change the color completely.

The use of track lighting can enhance the overall image your store presents. Track lighting also allows you to highlight particular displays or products in your store.

Fixtures

The fixtures used to display the products should be selected based upon appearance and size. The fixtures should not clash with the store decor. Neither should they distract from the product being displayed upon them. The height of fixtures being used will impact the perception the customer has of the store. Fixtures and traffic flow go hand in hand when merchandising a store.

Traffic Flow

How customers move around your store is very important to the success of your business. People have natural tendencies that must be taken into account when laying out a store. For instance, most people have a natural tendency to turn right when entering a store. This is a subconscious preference and being forced to go left can disrupt their comfort even if they don't know why.

Naturally, the more products a customer is exposed to, the more likely they are to buy. Perhaps as much as 70% of all purchases are made on impulse. This is vital to the success of the garden center. The more areas of your store they enter the more sales that will be generated.

In any store there are main aisles and secondary aisles. Main aisles or drive aisles, allow people to move quickly through a store and get from one department to another. They generally will be laid out in a more or less circular pattern, returning the customer back to the entrance of the store. Main aisles must be wider than secondary aisles in order to accommodate heavier traffic.

Secondary aisles are where most shopping actually occurs. The more secondary aisles a customer travels, the more purchases they may make. Orienting secondary aisles at a 45-degree angle from the main aisle rather than a 90-degree angle increases the likelihood of customers traveling that aisle.

The layout of the store can take several forms:

- Many stores display merchandise using a grid system. This traditional and familiar layout is easy to set up and restock, but it is often boring and uninspiring. The grid system is not conducive to plant combination and tie-in displays and there are many spots where merchandise gets little attention.
- A free-form layout is less efficient but allows for greater creativity. A spacious, luxurious image is created and there are many prime selling spots.

- A boutique layout is used on a large scale by department stores. Related products are combined into departments. This is convenient for customers and encourages tie-in sales.

Signage

Signs serve many purposes in the garden center. In garden centers there are typically three main categories of signs: directional, informational and product related.

- Directional signs help people move through the store to find what they are looking for. Typically, they will be large and consist of just one or two words, such as “cashier”, “grass seed” or “perennials”. Good directional signs make it easier for customers to find what they want and reduce the number of questions asked of employees.
- General information signs may include store hours, return policies or delivery information. They should be as concise as possible while conveying a clear point to the customer.
- Product related signs can be identifying, informational or promotional. Signs should include a space for the common name and botanical name, characteristics related to that plant, uses, prices and customers’ benefits. Each sign should suggest why a customer should buy that plant—for example, “Makes an excellent groundcover,” “Blooms in July” or “Tolerates salt from a road or driveway.”

Displays

Displays play a large part in creating your all-important image, as do salespeople, price, merchandise and many other factors. Displays should be both appealing and functional. Appealing displays show off merchandise to its best advantage, excite customers, encourage them to buy and give them new ideas. Functional displays allow you to handle a basic fact of retailing—everyone is in the store at the same time. For garden centers, those times are seven to eight weekends in both the spring and fall. Since it is impossible to help every customer immediately, merchandise should be displayed so customers can wait on themselves. Customers should be able to browse through the entire store while waiting to be helped. For those who are specifically looking for assistance, don’t make them wait too long, however.

If merchandise is easier to see, reach, touch, smell and inspect, customers are more apt to buy. Shelves should be located at a convenient height, somewhere between waist and eye level. Raised shelves are easier to view, reach and restock. A convenient depth for most people is two feet. If tiers are used, you can increase the depth slightly but be careful of the items on the first tier; they may get leaned on.

Segment Five - Maintenance

Maintenance of the garden center and plants is one of the most important daily jobs. Poorly maintained nursery stock can be the difference between a successful sale and just a browsing customer.

Although not always perceived this way, it is important to note that garden center operations are essentially growing operations, once received from the wholesale or rewholesale grower, the garden center is responsible for the care and quality of the plants it sells. This responsibility requires a grower mentality and significant horticultural knowledge and expertise. The alternative- allowing plants to fall into decline- is unacceptable.

To this end, all of the requirement associated with production become part of the daily activities of the garden center: watering/irrigation, fertilization, heeling-in, pruning, pest control, upgrading, and overwintering.

Watering (Irrigation)

Many times referred to as irrigation, watering is the lifeblood of all plant material. This is not a job that can be given to an unreliable employee, but should be taken on by one of the most conscientious and responsible employees. It is important to understand the plants come first- dead plants are worthless and a loss to the business. Always keep hoses neatly coiled and in a customer friendly spot.

There are many different ways to irrigate plants; the most common are hand-watering, sprinkler systems and drip irrigation systems. Hand watering is the process of an employee physically and personally applying water to the plants' root ball or pot. This type of watering is typical in small garden centers or where other more efficient irrigation techniques may miss materials or where tender or young material needs more attention. The filling of each individual pot to the point of flooding is usually sufficient with a hose or other delivery system. B&B material may need longer, slower hand irrigation to be watered properly. Hand watering is both time consuming and tedious, but many times is the way to assure that some stock is properly watered.

Heeling In (Storage)

Any balled and burlapped material must be heeled in immediately upon unloading. In Minnesota, it's the law. This will aid in water retention and cool the root ball to keep the roots alive. There are many products that can be used to heal in B & B material. The most common include straw or hay, sawdust, mulch or soil. All of these materials are fairly inexpensive and readily available. The idea behind healing in material is to cover the root ball with the material to the top, but not to cover the trunk or stems. Covering

the trunk or stems may cause rot or disease. Additional material may be added as necessary over time.

Fertilization

We know how important fertilization is to plant material in the landscape environment, it is doubly as important in the garden center setting. The plant material has limited growth space and is usually grown quickly for fast turn around in the garden center. When plant material comes into the garden center it may or may not have recently been fertilized by the grower. If fertilized, this application can last the plant from a few weeks to several months. An effective monitoring of fertilizer needs is critical to maintaining plant quality.

Receiving and Transport

When plant material arrives from the grower it is the first time you will get to inspect the product. This initial inspection is crucial to the future sale of the material. This is the time to go over every plant to search for future problems.

- Insects and disease are the first things to look for before the material leaves the truck. Any insect or disease within the material could easily and quickly infest and wipe out the material already in the garden center. The material should be completely rejected if any signs of insects or disease are found.
- This is also the time to inspect the quality and the trueness of the plant material. Sometimes what is ordered or viewed at the time of the order is not what is delivered. You must inspect the plant material to ensure that is what was originally ordered.
- During this inspection, plants should also be looked at for any damage that may have occurred during shipping. Broken plants, smashed plants, scraped trunks and damage to flowers are a few things to look for. This type of damage should be viewed as shipper or loading damage and may be rejected depending upon the extent and severity of the damage.
- A count of the incoming plant material should be made at this time. Make sure what was ordered is what is received; this can save money, time and hassles in the long run. Never take for granted that what is on the truck is what you are to receive or that is of superior quality.
- Plant materials should always be tarped or enclosed within a vehicle when transported. Plants should also be hydrated. Plants transported improperly may be rejected.

It is important to learn the proper way to carry plant materials. Lift a plant by the pot or root ball; never grasp the top of the plant itself. The plant may be damaged in a multitude of ways including tearing of foliage, ripping of roots, branch and stem stress, and breaking of flowers and buds. Potted plants should be carried by the pot with one hand underneath to support the plant and the other along the rim of the pot. B & B

material should be carefully carried by the root ball. If the material is heavy, a sling, ball cart, wheelbarrow or other mechanical means may be necessary. By no means should the stem or trunk be used in the lift of the plant. The plant should always be lifted and set down gently. Never drop or slam a pot or root ball down, as this can damage the root mass. Within the garden center the moving of plant materials can be accomplished many different ways. Some of the more popular methods are by hand, cart, skid steer, tractor, tow in motor or truck.

Segment Six - Safety

The garden center environment can present many visible and even more unforeseen hazards. In most instances, the safety within the garden center is easily managed from the onset. The keys behind a safe garden center are common sense and an observing eye. Using common sense, a person can detect, and in most cases, prevent an accident or potential hazard. The observing eye of a conscientious employee can often be the first line of defense in the ongoing battle to keep the garden center safe and enjoyable for all who work there and those who visit. Not all hazards are to employees; many are also to customers. An example, and perhaps the most common hazard, is tripping over hoses.

Segment Seven – Employee Fundamentals

A key part of a customer's garden center experience is their interaction with the employees. Good employees are vital assets of any business. The working environment often determines an employee's performance. A productive working environment, which allows employees to achieve their maximum potential, is conducive to maintaining good employee/customer relations, as well as employee to employee and employee to employer relations.

Employees' personal appearance is important and can begin easily with company uniforms, whether they consist of matching shirts with a company logo or a complete outfit with shirts, pants and a hat. All workers should be easily identifiable to your customers. Customers should never be unsure of who in the center is an employee. Nametags on a uniform will also help the customer to identify with employees.

In performing daily duties, attention to detail is one of an employee's strongest assets. In addition to making sure all materials are presented to the public in a neat and orderly manner, being pro-active about issues of inventory and plant condition is recommended. One idea is to carry a notebook, making notes as you go throughout your day. For example, if you sell a dwarf Alberta spruce and it is one of the last ten, make a note of the quantity. Before the end of your shift, make the purchasing officer or

the employer aware of the information so that inventory can be replenished. If you see a problem developing with insects, watering or disease, do your best to correct it or alert the person(s) responsible as soon as possible. Whether it is your primary duty or not, every employee should pay attention to detail, greatly improving the appearance and ease of shopping for the customer.

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