

World Travel Pays Off for Aquaserene

Irving Weiner discovers the recipe for success with merchandising for all seasons.

Irving Weiner, who opened Aquaserene 14 years ago, recently expanded by opening two more stores in Ashland, OR and Seattle, WA.

Irving Weiner is a doer, a sometimes spur-of-the-moment kind of man who built his diverse water feature, aquarium fish and hydroponic retail business not by planning years in advance, but by merging his goal of a creative and relaxing shopping experience with his take-action mindset.

"I'm more of a Jackson Pollack type: Go in and do it," Weiner said, referring to the eccentric abstract artist. "And I always have several projects going."

Art, it seems, influences every aspect of Aquaserene, based in Eugene, Ore. Weiner has also recently opened branches in Seattle, as well as Ashland, Ore.

AT A GLANCE

Name of business: Aquaserene
Locations: Eugene, Ore., Ashland, Ore. Seattle
Phone: (541) 302-9073, Toll Free (877) 368-0782
Hours of operation: Monday-Saturday 10-6, Sunday 11-6
Years in business: 14
Staff: 20 to 24 (fluctuates seasonally)
Space: Eugene—28,000 square feet; Ashland—2,000 square feet; Seattle—3,000 square feet

These newer branches parallel Weiner's multi-dimensional business philosophy.

Container gardens, display bogs and a fountain showcase Aquaserene's offerings of aquatic and marginal plants, flanked by koi display ponds. "The most lucrative area [of my business] is the diversity," he said. "By being so diverse I have no slow times."

The exterior of the main Eugene store is modest to say the least. The sheet metal exterior makes the building blend into a strip of light industrial and commercial buildings.

"From the outside it looks uninviting," said manager Shayna McGinnis. "We spent so much time renovating inside that we didn't spend much time on the outside."

The inside is quite a sensory contrast. Customers who walk into the lobby of the sprawling 28,000-square-foot complex in Eugene are greeted by a 3000-gallon pond stocked with koi. Plants border the perimeter of the pond and Persian rugs lay underfoot.

The experience of Aquaserene is a feast for the senses. Guests hear puntumayo music—a fusion of traditional and modern music from around the world. Scented candles enhance the sense of smell. Fresh coffee and cherry tomatoes grown in a hydroponic display area enhance the sense of taste.

Statuary graces a 3,000 gallon koi pond near the entry of Aquaserene's Eugene, OR location. A self-described world traveler, Weiner purchases much of his statuary, Indonesian palapa tables with thatched umbrellas, Persian rugs and other decorative pieces from his global sojourns. He also sells soaps and lotions from France and frequents gift trade shows worldwide looking for new ideas, said McGinnis. The purpose of all this ambience is to create what Weiner calls the "Aquaserene experience." "I love to come to work," he said. "It's so pleasant. We have good quality people that can answer questions. One guy said this feels like a vacation." "Unique, inviting, educational and eclectic," says McGinnis about the store's atmosphere. "It's fun to work here. He [Weiner] definitely has a vision of where he wants

the business to go."

Why does Weiner go to such lengths to enhance the shopping experience?

"In my business if I weren't so diversified, I would be out, because it's impossible to compete, unless you have something that is so different," he said.

Hand-carved statuary collected from Weiner's journeys abroad complimentsthe store's garden accessories.

Weiner originally sold aquarium fish and plant life. For 14 years he leased a part of the current commercial complex that housed several other businesses, including an auto mechanic, a soccer supply shop and a paintball venue. He bought the building two years ago, using most of the space for storage and manufacturing.

"It was hard to find a place that's zoned to do all the activities that we do," Weiner said.

Weiner's other retail operations also feature a wide variety of products. The 3,000-square-foot Seattle location sells primarily hydroponic and indoor/outdoor garden supplies.

The Ashland, Ore., branch also sells indoor/outdoor supplies. When he was growing up, Weiner said, there were a lot more fish stores in a lot more places. Now that it's so difficult to sustain a business on fish alone, diversity goes a long way in keeping a high customer flow.

Generally, says Weiner, the indoor garden center business peaks in late summer and fall, as people get their indoor facilities ready to go before the cold, damp Northwest winter. The holidays are when aquarium fish business is highest. Water garden business is best in the summer.

"People from all walks of life come into the store," Weiner said. "With this store I try to make a statement for a higher clientele. For that, you have to have different product lines."

His children, Austin and Lisa, have helped him add to the repertoire of products. Austin helped start the hydroponics arm of the business about eight years ago, and Lisa has worked with aquarium fish off and on for years.

Aquaserene employees cut custom liner from spools on the grounds of the 28,000 square foot complex in Eugene, OR. The variety of fish offered echoes that diversity of products.

Aquaserene sells primarily smaller koi, at three to four and five to six inches. Several foot-long koi call Weiner's lobby home, and with a new large pond being built, that number could increase. Weiner stocks both domestic and Japanese koi.

The aquarium fish run the gamut from several types of goldfish like the run of the mill common comet all the way to reef fish and even sharks. Weiner is a native of New York City. He said growing up in that fast-paced quickly environment gave him the tolls-street smarts and the ability ti quickly tune into what people want-to succeed in business.

That doesn't mean, however, that'll he'll do anything for a dollar. The company's policy of honesty prevents the staff of about 20 from trying to be something they're not.

"We are not architects," Weiner said when asked whether he designs customer ponds. "We are not allowed to practice veterinary medicine either, so we don't."

His prices, therefore, aren't the cheapest around, but they are fair considering his quality requirement. Weiner is quick to point out that 90 percent of his statuary is carved by hand.

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