

## Idea Exchange August 2002 - Protecting Your Reputation

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### Protecting Your Reputation

Word of mouth can make or break a business. Fast, poor quality jobs eventually eat into future profits with fewer referrals, higher call backs and a shrinking market. It is one of those intangible things that is easy to shrug off, but poorly built ponds cut market potential. What could have been a prospective client is lost when word of mouth reaches them saying, "Oh, you don't want a pond. They're too much work, the water is always dirty. They're expensive to maintain."

This is happening to some extent on a national level. Witness exhibit A, last year's article in the Wall Street Journal entitled "Small Ponds, Big Problems?" If you missed it here are a some quotes that give you the gist: "As Water Gardening Booms, Ponders' Patience Runs Dry...." "To keep a pond in good health, the water has to be tested daily, the bottom should be cleaned weekly, and — most onerous of all — the whole thing needs to be drained and completely scrubbed once a year." "...the pump would bog down from debris, there was the mess of cleaning it every three weeks, and we had algae and dead fish." Poor ponds build poor reputations. Bad press reduces your market. The good news is that it's avoidable. There is a way to build ponds that works.

Avoidable problems come to the surface from information consistently voiced by thousands of clients nationwide in every aspect of water gardening. Rather than opinion formed from limited experience in one aspect of water gardening or in one region, every spoke in the industry water gardening wheel has something valuable to share. Actual installation experience teaches reality of construction challenges like nothing else can. Likewise, retailing to the public that come in lamenting of defective pond installation and poor equipment teaches another side.

The most common universal problems and proven solutions are addressed below.

**Problem: Confusion.** The industry is still young and developing in many ways. Proven standards have not been universally adapted. Clients and professionals alike are subject to misinformation resulting in poor quality ponds and equipment.

**Solution:** Educate yourself. Know the background of the person offering the advice. Try it out and see for yourself.

**Problem: No Profit on Goods.** Some basic pond equipment does not allow retailers and contractors to make reasonable profits from their sales efforts.

**Solution:** Do not purchase supplies from distributors that undercut you and sell directly to consumers at an equal or lower price. New products roll out constantly in this industry. Savvy manufacturers respect the importance of pricing tiers and don't bite the hand that feeds them. They either don't sell to all different market groups or, if they do, they qualify all discounts so each respective link in the chain can be successful. Shop around and inquire with peers.

**Problem: Unhappy Pond Owners.** High maintenance, low quality ponds kill hobbyist enthusiasm and damage the industry. Customers happy immediately after installation will become unhappy when the pond does not stay clean, clear and easy to maintain.

**Solution:** Create low-maintenance, living ecosystems that don't just look good a few months after installation, but for years to come. Look for a line of equipment that takes these items into account: quality hardware that lasts, has good warranties, and is energy efficient and easy to maintain.

Look for equipment that is not just adapted from the pool and spa industry. Ponds have unique requirements. They have heavy waste loads and living ecology that toxic chemicals should not be used in. Look for a system that incorporates and promotes beneficial bacteria.

Good pond design and equipment should work in harmony to create a living system. Living systems rely on high levels of beneficial bacteria to break down waste, clear water, fight algae and balance pond chemistry. Healthy systems have plentiful filter media for beneficial bacteria and good circulation. The pond itself should be designed as a large

re-circulating filtration system that does not require constant maintenance and supplements.

Not only does building a pond right build your reputation, business and encourage future industry growth, it isn't any harder to do than doing it wrong. Plus, building it right results in greater profits because well-designed ponds are easier to sell, install and maintain.

—Contributed by Tavo Holloway. She is president of International Pond Supply Inc., Santa Fe, N.M.; 888-646-5474; [www.pondsource.com](http://www.pondsource.com).

#### Free Shipping

Online shoppers still look for free shipping, according to Retail Forward Inc., a consulting and market research firm in Columbus, Ohio. Fifty-six percent of Internet users decided where to make a purchase based on the fact they could get free shipping, according to a survey of 533 Internet users conducted May 31 to June 4, 2002.

Moreover, 70 percent of respondents indicated that they would shop online more if they didn't have to pay shipping and handling charges.

"Free shipping continues to represent the best way for e-retailers to bolster average order size and conversion rates," said Geoff Wissman, vice president of Retail Forward and editor of its E-Retail Intelligence Update newsletter.

"Free shipping offers influence online purchase decisions and have the potential to substantially influence overall online sales," he said.

Multi-channel retailers, however, typically resist the urge to offer free shipping and typically view it as a profit center, the firm reported.

#### We Want To Know...

Odd places you've advertised your business and how effective it's been.

A Southern Californian man was recently very impressed with a bus-side advertisement for one of those quickie oil change places. The ad itself wasn't so memorable, but its placement drove home the message: "If I don't change my oil soon, I'll be riding the bus."

Similarly, those billboards for new urban developments placed between cities and suburbs reading "If you lived here, you'd be home now" captures an audience of grid-locked drivers. In an industry such as water gardening where a premium is often paid for creativity, creative advertising can truly bolster a company's marketing efforts.

Obviously, you need to cover the basics first, and that will vary by market, business strategy and proven effectiveness. For a retailer or landscaper, this may include the Yellow Pages and other business phone directories, perhaps a Web site, local newspapers, direct mail, etc.

However, by budgeting extra for the unexpected, you'll be able to take advantage of unique opportunities that can really make your business stand out.

If you have had success (or failure) advertising in a less conventional manner, please let Water Garden News know. We are interested in hearing from you.

#### Government Handouts

The Federal Consumer Information Center is offering a package of two publications: Starting a Small Business from the U.S. Small Business Administration and A Guide to Business Credit for Women, Minorities, and Small Businesses from the Federal Reserve System. These booklets are packed with information on such topics as developing a business plan, how to get loans, where to turn for technical help, sorting through legalities, understanding cash flow, marketing, and more.

These publications offer information on selecting a location and evaluating the competition. They also explain how to get money for a business start-up or for expanding operations.

The package will cost \$1 if ordered by phone; they're free if downloaded from the website. Call 888-8-PUEBLO or visit, [www.pueblo.gsa.gov](http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov).

Nothing To Sneeze At

Landscapes designed to mitigate allergies will become increasingly in demand, according to Thomas Leo Ogren, author of *Allergy Free Gardening* (Ten Speed Press.)

Thus, landscapers will be expected to be able to design non-allergenic gardens, he believes. Moreover, large organizations, particularly government agencies, may require their landscapes be non-allergenic, much as they now ban smoking and provide handicapped access.

Additionally, certain communities may embrace non-allergenic gardening as a way to boost home values, the thought being a non-allergenic environment is more appealing, Ogren said.

Ogren ranks more than 5,000 plants by allergy potential in his book. His Ogren Plant Allergy Scale (OPALS) ranks plants from 1 (least allergenic) to 10 (most allergenic). For example, the pollen-free red maple Autumn Glory ranks 1 while staminate pepper trees top out at 10.

One ramification of the ranking is that highly allergenic plants will fall out of favor and less-allergenic plants grow in popularity as people consider allergens in their plant buying decisions.

While aquatic plants such as water lilies do have potentially problematic pollen, there are rarely enough plants concentrated closely together to trigger allergic reactions, according to Ogren.

He has heard of a few cases of hay fever-type symptoms associated with water lily pollen, but always when people were boating through large patches of water lilies in lakes.

While lilies may cause allergic reactions, particularly to highly sensitive individuals, Ogren does not consider it a major concern.

Certain other plants used in water gardening — such as sedges and rushes — are more likely to be problematic, Ogren said.

Water Garden News seeks your ideas on building water-garden businesses — whether it be better retailing, installation and design tips, how to retain and motivate employees, or how to market your business. We'll pay \$50 for published submissions. Please send your ideas (50-200 words) and photos if appropriate to: Idea Exchange, Water Garden News, 3 Burroughs, Irvine, CA 92618; fax (949) 855-3045, or e-mail [bhutchins@fancypubs.com](mailto:bhutchins@fancypubs.com). Water Garden News cannot take responsibility for return of materials.

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