

Idea Exchange October 2003 - Twenty Brains Are Better Than One

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Pacific Water Gardens, a large nursery in Oregon that wholesales aquatic plants and ponds, tried this technique during its annual two-day meeting last year.

Management invited 20 employees, ranging from the owners of the company to the newest hires, to come in and create a list of reasons why people should buy a pond rather than a hot tub.

The list would help answer a question Ty Peterson, sales manager for Pacific Water Gardens, says is frequently asked at trade shows, "Should I spend my money on a hot tub or a pond?"

"It was a great way to have everyone participate in something and give their own perspectives," says Peterson.

The group sat together and shouted out ideas while someone wrote them all down on a whiteboard.

The result was the clever and highly useful "40 Reasons Why Owning a Pond is Better Than Owning a Hot Tub."

Reasons to buy a pond include:

A pond may increase your property value.

Ponds are the wave of the future, hot tubs are "so 1980s."

A pond greatly enhances the view from your home.

A hot tub doesn't make a very good background for a photograph.

"This was a fun way to help solve a question we had been getting, and it's been very well received," says Peterson.

She says now a laminated copy of the list is handed out at trade shows, sent to trade publications, and even requested by contractors. Sometimes a fresh outlook is as close as a company roster.—Piper Romersa

Let's Make a Deal

Absolutely Fish, the 2003 Pet Product News Retailer of the Year, runs a special "Let's Make a Deal" sale every so often. In this promotion, each sales associate is given a small envelope, which they pass on to customers if they assist them with a purchase.

Customers are told that the envelope contains a coupon good for 5, 10, 15, 20 or 25 percent off their purchase. Because customers don't know the value of the coupon until after they make their purchase, it creates a fun and exciting shopping environment.

And to make sure no customer feels like they're losers, the Clifton, N.J., store doesn't really give out the 5 percent coupons. Its belief is that customers would feel as if they lost the contest if they received the lowest possible discount.

Policy Fallacies

Stupid policies can make even the most courteous and knowledgeable employee incapable of delivering customer-retaining service, says John Tschohl, a management consultant.

For example, Tschohl's son had wanted a friend to ship his dog from Texas to Minnesota. The son would pay the fare, of course. The airline's policy: the sending party had to pay. The bottom line: Tschohl's son has vowed never to use the airline.

The thing about most stupid policies is they probably made a lot of sense at one time, at least to the person who established them. The trick is identifying which policies have become stupid and are hurting the business. Commerce Bank is so concerned about the negative impact of these policies that they pay a \$50 bonus to employees that identify stupid policies to eliminate, Tschohl says.

Also important: making sure employees, especially the ones who deal directly with customers, are allowed to bend and break rules to make the customer happy quickly.

Regular customer service training for all employees is also important, Tschohl says. He recommends presenting new material to employees at least every six months. The frequency emphasizes the importance a business places on customer service, and changing the message keeps folks interested.

To check out Tshohl's free weekly e-newsletter on customer service, visit www.customer-service.com.

Best Seller Strategy

Identifying best sellers in various retail categories will give novice customers confidence in products and your business, says Australian merchandising consultant John Stanley in the American Nursery & Landscape Association's award-winning Retail Recipes program.

Stanley reasons that by using signs to steer customers to best sellers, retailers can reinforce buying choices (i.e., x number of people can't be wrong) without taking a staff member's time.

Another tip: Place the best sellers in sub-prime merchandising locations. They'll sell anyways, Stanley says.

The Retail Recipes program offers 150 merchandising and promotional ideas, delivered in 15-packs of weather resistant cards over two years. The ideas feature photographs of sample displays and step-by-step instructions.

The program was recently one of 29 that received an Award for Publication Excellence for design and layout from Communications Concepts Inc.

For more information, including pricing, visit www.retailrecipes.com.

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. Water Garden News cannot take responsibility for return of materials.

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