

## A One-stop-shopping Model for Pond Businesses

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The contractors working at The Design Center (from left): Debbra, Mark and Debbie. (Courtesy of Trevor Cole)When pond and water garden customers want to complete a home improvement project, they can find a dizzying array of choices often offered in multiple places. Customers do not know where to start or who to trust. Pond and water garden professionals can make the process easier for customers and profitable for you by offering a central clearinghouse to provide for all customers' outdoor living needs.

We were in the landscape business, but when our retail business took off, we narrowed our focus. The landscaping customers remained, seeking service, maintenance and installation.

For a time, we referred those customers directly to private landscape contractors, who were customers of our stores. Once the referral was made, however, we lost quality control. Many contractors did not follow up on the leads, which negatively impacted on our relationships with customers.

Taking a cue from the one-stop-shopping concept, we added The Design Center at Across the Pond. The Design Center consists of a loose conglomeration of high-quality independent contractors who prove loyal to us and respect our commitment to customer service. When we receive an inquiry for landscaping, water features or outdoor living spaces, we refer it to one of our three designers to follow up.

The designers work as exclusive sub-contractors for our design center. They review each inquiry and meet with customers at one of our stores or on-site.

If the customer's inquiry requires very little design or consultancy, we pass it on to one of our loyal contractors. More often than not, the inquiry involves design work.

Some customers choose only to buy a design from us, but most want us to design and manage the whole project. If the customer decides to proceed, payment goes to The Design Center at Across the Pond and the designer. The Design Center pays the contractors, less the cost of materials supplied by Across the Pond.

An award-winning sample of The Design Center's work. (Courtesy of Trevor Cole)We share the many benefits. For the contractor, we remove the cost and headache of selling, and we become a steady source of quality jobs. Customer receive a guaranteed quality of work, a place to return to if problems crop up and a one-stop experience where everything can be accomplished easily and efficiently.

Across the Pond gets the sale of all the supply materials, a deeper loyalty from our contractor customers and a stronger relationship with our retail customers. The whole setup does not cost us a dime. Everyone works as a sub-contractor, so no sale, no pay.

We found that most jobs turn out larger than originally intended by the customer. In these slower economic times, small contractors appreciate the constant referrals.

The cost of each job includes a small commission that covers the space and administration costs associated with The Design Center. Customers who use our design services want the convenience of all-inclusive service rather than the lowest bid.

In the two years we have been operating The Design Center, it proved very successful. We produce more inquiries than our three designers can handle. Everyone wins.