

Boost Sales During Your Slow Season

Tuesday, Dec. 1, 2009, 7:40 p.m., EST

My daughter, Olivia, helps to personally greet each guest at our Open House event. (Courtesy of Trevor Cole) Winter is a quiet time for most pond and garden-related stores. What's a business to do?

Roll up the carpet and go home early? Go hunting? Convince ourselves that there's no work to be done?

Do you realize what you might be missing? How about taking the time to personally greet your customers with a handshake and sincere thank you?

December traditionally brings in a lower volume of sales, so we decided to do something positive and different during this 'down time.' We began staging an Open House several years ago.

Our employees, including Marvin and his wife Nell, each bring a home-cooked treat to the Open House event. (Courtesy of Trevor Cole) The Open House generated good cash flow during the nontraditional sales period. Open House also created such excitement with our employees and good will with our customers that it quickly became an annual tradition.

For the critics and skeptics who disagree with this business strategy, our Open House days generate a sales volume as good as one of our best spring days. It helps us clear out stock at the end of the year and fosters strong customer relations.

The Open House works like this:

1. Plan the Open House for late autumn or early winter. The first or second Saturday in December works best for us.

One of our customers brings a miniature horse named Blaze (above) and goat named Pepper (below) for the children to pet and be photographed with. (Courtesy of Trevor Cole) 2. Entice customers with home-cooked treats. Rather than hire a caterer, which is more impersonal, our employees take charge and each bring one of their own culinary specialties.

Foods range from cheese balls to chili. We grill food and serve customers right from our outdoor kitchen displays.

3. Greet everyone at the door. My wife, Jeannie, and daughter, Olivia dress in Christmas sweaters and welcome customers at the front door as if they were guests in our home.

4. Entertain your guests. Thanks to an enthusiastic customer, our Open House the past two years has included a goat, Pepper, dressed in a Santa outfit and a miniature horse, Blaze, in a Christmas hat. The children get to pet and be photographed with the animals.

5. Appeal to customers' senses. From the smell of fresh coffee and hot apple cider to the sound of holiday music and the sight of decorated trees throughout the store, we attempt to tickle as many senses as possible with the holiday spirit.

6. Give away door prizes. We find that established vendors often donate prizes for such events.

7. Offer special sales. Our Open House event lasts one day, but our holiday sale runs for about two weeks from Black Friday to Dec. 15.

During this genuine sale, customers receive 20 percent off store-wide plus other high-discount specials. We buy some items specifically for a designated 50-percent-off sale.

Ask your vendors about close-out and clearance items that might be available for this purpose. Also, clear out slow-moving inventory. If it has not sold, it's costing you money to sit on your shelves.

8. Send out invitations. We promote our Open House with radio advertisements, e-mail blasts, personal in-store invitations and folksy postcards mailed to everyone on our mailing list. Personalize invitations to make each customer feel like you are inviting them specifically.

Most importantly, make everyone feel welcome. Our Open House tagline is: "Bring your family to meet our family."