

## Creating Fun, Memorable Retail Experiences

Monday, August 24, 2009, 8:30 p.m., EDT

Interaction activities such as feeding fish (above) and aviary guides can increase retail customer visits and enjoyment. (Photos courtesy of Trevor Cole)As my wife and I strolled through the sidewalks of Venice and admired the piazzas, statues and painted walls, our 6-year old daughter Olivia was more interested in spotting fish in the labyrinth of canals. When Olivia sees water, she thinks "fish," and the only thing that distracted her from her quest was chasing the pigeons in St. Mark's Square.

It's the same at our store. Customers come to see the fish and the birds.

Although we are predominantly an outdoor living store, we offer live scenery in the form of fish, birds and reptiles to entertain and attract our customers. Nature is the perfect complement to ponds and water gardens.

The greeter at our main store is a cockatiel named Andy. He welcomes customers with a wolf-whistle. Two parrotlets and a sun conures keep him company. These social birds love the attention and attract quite a bit of notice.

We also have a giant fish called Wanda (pun intended) in the big tank that customers can feed and an aviary of budgies in the courtyard overlooking the Nature Garden. Near the aviary you might spot Mr. and Mrs. Iggy, our pet iguanas. In the back pond, customers can find an assortment of turtles living with native fish, koi and goldfish.

Customers bring children, grandchildren and out-of-town friends to observe all the critters. It's entertainment. It's an event. It's something to do.

In some cases, a trip to our store is an all-day activity. Businesses don't need a zoo or elaborate animal display to attract more customers. Some critters, like our turtles, will find you if you have a display pond.

The big box competition cannot offer this natural live scenery because its business model does not allow for it. Unlike most stores, we do not have signs telling customers to keep their hands out of the water.

We encourage visitors to interact with our critters. Where else can people go to pet a 38-inch fish that will eat from their hands or have a cockatiel sit on their shoulders while they peruse the garden flags?

During summer, children romp through our Nature Garden in search of butterflies and rabbits. In the spring and fall, they bring their lunches to sit out on the covered patio and watch the turtles and the catfish lazing in the pond. When mid-winter arrives, visitors surround the wood-burning stove where they can comfortably watch the backyard birds from our Nature Observation Room.

Every season provides something entertaining. Our goal is for every customer to leave our stores having had a fun and memorable experience every time they visit.

When Olivia wrote her back-to-school essay about what she did this summer, Italy, Croatia and Greece were noticeably absent from the first sentence of her report. Instead, she wrote that she got to spend the weekend feeding fish as Across the Pond.