

Think Outside the Box ... the Big Box

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My family and I in Santorini, Greece, the so-called lost island of Atlantis. On the Greek isle of Santorini, it's a steep 1,000 foot hike up to the main village on which modest white-washed homes perch on the cliff overlooking the Aegean Sea. Some of the tiny walled courtyards feature a small fountain or perhaps a large clay olive jar full of water. Santorini has no rivers and water is scarce. But through the centuries, locals have filled water cisterns from the rain that fell on roofs and have used it not only to survive, but to add an extra element of beauty and tranquility to their stunning little corner of the world.

Some believe this to be the lost island of Atlantis. This remote island has no chain stores and few cars. So where do these water features come from? And if not from a pre-packaged supplier, who dreams them up?

As retailers, most of us are not on a remote island. We have 'competition' from the Big Box stores. But we can offer something that the chain stores do not - namely some creativity along with expertise.

Think outside the pond and outside the Box (as in Big Box). Too many retailers, especially those new to the business, think a water feature has to be a traditional skimmer, waterfall and rock-filled pond. That should be - and for us, it is - only a small part of a pond store's business. Consider easy-to-build water features such as bubbling boulders and re-circulating jars. These features are simple to install and have extremely low maintenance, yet still fulfill the need for the sound of flowing water and the ability to attract nature. Be creative with your choices and --- like the olive jars in Greece --- use accouterments native to your area.

Glazed pots filled with water and floating roses in Dubrovnik, Croatia.

In Dubrovnik, Croatia, we found a lovely hotel flanked with glazed pots filled with water and floating roses. The understated but elegant effect was a charming welcome to the Dalmatian Coast. How simple and classic! Set up similar displays, showcasing your own ideas and products, in your store. Not only does it set the scene by offering ambiance, but it gives customers some easy ideas.

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Do not be afraid of the Big Box. Use them as allies. A few years ago, one of the discount chains in our area offered a \$99.99 'Complete Pond Kit.' Similar products can still be found on the Internet. We cannot compete with that price nor should we try. My business actually increased once folks started purchasing those 'starter' ponds. Why? Because they got hooked on water gardening. And once they were sold, they wanted the supplies and equipment to grow it. Once you position yourself as the local expert, the Big Box will refer customers to you for upgrades, ideas and advice. The products you offer should be quality brands that are not heavily discounted by e-commerce.

Remember that your most important offering is you. Customers will pay for your expertise and local customer service. And if you throw in a few creative ideas, they might just drop by to see your bubbling olive jar.