

PROFITING FROM CHRISTMAS

Though a short sales period, Christmas can be profitable.

By Ralph Gaudio

Making the most of the holiday season can be easy if you create a plan and follow through with it, including staffing accordingly. Though the window of sales is short, the holiday season can be extremely profitable if a plan is followed.

Garden centers across the country have found out over the years that Christmas is the time to make a high margin on your dollars. With discount stores and home centers becoming players in the industry, independent retailers have to work harder than ever creating displays, promotions and unique buying strategies to combat the big boxes. Here are a few tips to get your holiday mind moving.

MERCHANDISING

Merchandising is always important, especially when it comes to the holiday season. Months ago, you probably sat down with your staff and brainstormed ideas for this holiday season, reviewing what worked and what did not from last year. Hopefully, you discussed new trends and identified ways to meet them. There is still time to capitalize on your ideas.

Sketch out each department and know that your schematics are correct. Since the fall garden season is still under way, it is beneficial to start turning your store from the least traffic filled areas to the most heavily traffic filled. Visual displays are, of course, going to be your best selling tool. By merchandising better than the previous year you will keep the wow in your displays and the customers returning to see what has been created for this season.

CREATING DEMAND

Always keep your eye out for that trendy item that will sell out during the holiday season. Once you and/or your buyers find that unique, hot item of the season, let the world know. Obtaining exposure for your location is only a phone call away. Once you obtain a quantity of an item, one free way to get exposure is to call your local news media and get them to do a spot at your location. Let the public know you have plenty of this "hot item" in stock. The consumers will flock to your door.

Another way to draw in customers is to host an event. At my store, we hold a catered, invitation-only preview party each November. Your preview weekend is the commencement of the chaos. This gives the viewing public the opportunity to peruse your store at their leisure in an elegant environment. Provide a pre-season discount and have Santa on hand for the kiddies. The purpose of the preview is to plant a seed in the consumer's mind, getting them ready for what you hope will be many return visits.

DRAW IN THE CHILDREN

Some say Christmas is all about the children. In this case, it may be true, and no one knows this better than their parents. In order to separate yourself from the run-of-the-mill stores it is imperative that you reach the children. Believe it or not, children have a lot of say when it comes to shopping and holiday activities. At our store, we have done this for 50 years by creating a Christmas animated walkthrough for children. It is a



Top: Ray Wiegand's Nursery, Macomb Township, Mich., attracts customers year-round, even at Christmas. **Bottom:** Having Santa on hand and carrying children's Christmas items will help identify your store as a family destination.

multitude of cartoon-related animated scenes set in a wooded "forest." At the end of the winding tour is the man himself, Santa. Complete with a photo shop and live characters, there is always something new.

In that same area we offer "good this day only" coupons to capitalize on the increased traffic. Once you have reached the children they will nudge their parents to return. Also, if you market yourself as a family destination when out of towners come in for the holidays, your customers will want to take them to a holiday landmark, not the local mall, for a holiday night out.

MARKETING

You've heard it before, but I want to remind you: It is vital that independents get the word out. Market your business each and every day — hold promotions each weekend; plan a parade; hold how-to seminars, anything to get customers in the door. Once the customers are there, it is your job to capitalize on the traffic and keep those registers ringing a holiday tune. 🎄

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