

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Show & Tell

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“Anyone can do it! It’s just planning and cleaning,” says Office Manager Ali Cude about Sedan Floral’s open house strategy implemented this year. Although when describing more of the details and behind-the-scenes work, it quickly becomes clear that the entire Kansas wholesaler’s team rallied to create an excellent event for customers.

And it is really teamwork and dedication that seems to be the key to successful greenhouse open house events. So maybe the moral of the story is that if you have a shared mission, passionate team members and a clear goal, pulling off a successful open house isn’t as hard as it might seem.

Putting some details to the work involved, Carlos Dias, Production Coordinator at Bradford Greenhouses in Ontario, explains that for his team to host their annual multi-purpose open house, it takes at least two to three days of cleaning and organizing, office staff and sales staff to send invites and communicate the dates and times to customers, and a full day of setup.

What all greenhouse open house event leaders say is that the payoff in terms of both customer appreciation and team pride makes it all worthwhile.

Define your goals

Let’s back up a few steps and discuss some of the reasons why greenhouse operators put this effort to open their business up to customers, peers and other green industry groups. There are actually quite a few formats these events take on—depending on the grower’s business model.

Wholesale greenhouses selling young plants might use an open house to expose grower customers to new young plants and even book orders at an event. A wholesaler selling to retail and landscape might want to show off new production facilities, demonstrate innovative growing techniques to differentiate from competitors, or even train retail staff on postharvest care and retail strategies. Perhaps the greenhouse specializes in seasonal crops, and knows the crop quality and vastness is sure to amaze. What better way to gain new business than to open up the greenhouse and showcase amazing quality holiday plants in a fun, party atmosphere?

No matter what the end goal is, it seems that greenhouse professionals share one common thought when it comes to events: inviting folks to the greenhouse increases loyalty, builds relationships and gets both staff and customers excited about the future. Like any successful endeavor, identifying a goal and working from there to develop the steps needed to reach the goal is critical. When your team aligns on a shared goal, it’ll be much easier to get everyone on board and working toward a positive outcome.

According to Amy Morris, Vice President at N.G. Heimos Greenhouses in Missouri, their annual open house and trial

was requested by poinsettia breeders more than a decade ago. After some key longstanding poinsettia trials ceased to exist, some of the top breeders of the holiday crop needed a North American site for brokers and growers to visit and evaluate the crop.

To fill the void, Heimos stepped up and took on the task. This has become a much-anticipated annual event and Amy says the 2019 version will showcase 12,000 to 14,000 pots of more than 170 varieties grown in blocks, including black cloth and natural-season production. It will attract a global audience of hundreds over the course of an entire week, culminating in a friends-and-family day complete with Santa and plenty of photo opportunities.

What's the best time?

One of the common questions related to greenhouse events and open houses is when to host—what season makes the most sense for both growers and attendees? This sort of depends on the goal of the event.

“Our event is in mid-March [in Ontario, Canada] when Bradford Greenhouses has excess plug inventory and there's still time for our customers to plant it up,” according to Carlos. That time of year also allows Bradford to invite key retail buyers to the event, on a different day the same week, to see spring production and train up on new products, learn about items that will be promoted in ads and meet with sales personnel to make sure everything is in line for the coming season.

At Sedan Floral, event timing was different—because the goals were different. Their event revolved around five days of meetings and tours with customers in very early fall. This allowed Sedan's sales team to meet with customers at a time that was convenient for them, when not a lot was going on at their retail and landscape businesses. They were able to review the past season, share what new programs were coming the following year and still offered a great on-site experience seeing greenhouses full of fall crops.

Of course, for Amy and the Heimos team, the poinsettia focus pretty much determined the timing—the week before Thanksgiving when the seasonal crop can be timed for its peak show just like it would be in any production greenhouse. But she explains there are some dedicated days within the week for specific groups.

“Tuesday is grower clinics for a large retailer, Wednesday is broker day where breeder participants present in a round robin format, Thursday is our grower open house and we also invite high schools and colleges,” she says. “A newer idea (for about the past five years) is to host a trade show on the grower day, funded by sponsors who have tabletop exhibits.” Then the Sunday that week is open to the public, and in 2018, there were more than 4,500 who attended.

No matter the time of year you choose, be sure to consider your customers' business cycles, the state of your greenhouses and stress level of your staff, and your ability to impact decision making and drive sales. This way the chance of success will be maximized.

Feed them locally

Feeding large groups can be tricky, in terms of logistics, cost and even menu planning. One idea that always seems to go over well is to eat local. Work with a favorite caterer or restaurant to bring in a fun, local meal. Maybe the greenhouse owner is all about Italian food—then go Italian! Maybe the region is known for great barbeque or Tex-Mex—there you go. Remember, you'll never please everyone, but if you go local, at least there's a fun story to tell.

And those who've hosted events in the past will no doubt remind you to have plenty of food so you don't run out, and make sure there are plenty of tables and chairs, because after a morning of greenhouse tours, attendees will be ready for a seat.

“Our events are catered by local restaurants,” Amy explains. “We like to keep the money in our community. They support us!”

You may decide to keep the event to a half day, and in that case, coffee, fruit and pastries might be all you need. In that case, be sure to allow for morning networking time and don't rush people off on tours or into meetings without allowing for some casual "get-to-know-you" time. This will certainly pay off because, in many cases, your customers might deal with you primarily over the phone or via email and this face-to-face opportunity could be the most effective time of the entire event.

The last idea for food requires a foodie team member. Maybe you have a fantastic chef, queen salsa maker or legendary grill master on your squad. If you're this lucky, consider asking them to showcase their skills. Talk about adding personality to an event!

Good guidance

With any event, lessons are learned each time and there's no reason why you can't learn from others who've gone before. Here are some pro tips to help you avoid common pitfalls:

- Carlos made it clear that hosting a group in an actively operating production greenhouse requires attention to safety for all visitors.

"We ran four tour groups through a work environment," he says. "We split them up into groups so everyone could hear and so that the staff giving tours would not be overwhelmed."

With 20 to 30 people max in each group, he still felt that one change Bradford might make for following events would be getting microphones and speakers for the tour leaders.

- Amy says that at their open house, it's very important to maintain a true trial experience, as evidenced by the sheer number of plants grown (12,000 to 14,000) versus one or two specimen plants on pedestals. This authenticity goes a long way with customers and peers.

"We show our mess ups; it's a real greenhouse setting and trial," she says. "People see if a crop has gotten away from us, but still get a good look at how to fix the problem."

Because of this, there are many learning experiences to be found in the trials. Your customers know there's no such thing as a perfect crop, so don't be afraid to show them the reality of your business.

- For operations that sell to many customers, often in nearby locations, be sure to ask for RSVPs in advance so any competitive situations can be avoided. You want each guest to feel special and sometimes this requires a divide-and-conquer approach. With plenty of staff on hand and some time to prepare, the customer experience can remain intimate.

What's the bottom line when it comes to open houses and events? Consider your business model and target audience. Think about both their time and business cycle, as well as your own when planning. Start small and focused, and expect interest from customers who love to see other businesses in action and put faces to names. Everyone wants to solidify loyalty and increase sales, and hosting customers in your greenhouse, meeting your team and seeing your business behind-the-scenes builds relationships and trust.

Add some tasty local food and a bit of information or education, and there's no doubt folks will see your business differently—as a true partner—by the end of the experience. **GT**



Clockwise from top left: Reading a poinsettia trial with more than 10,000 plants gives attendees at N.G. Heimos Greenhouses' annual event plenty of data to help with decision making. • An opportunity to engage with industry experts and product managers is one of the top reasons growers come back to the N.G. Heimos poinsettia trials year after year. • Seeing production teams in action at Bradford Greenhouses gives visiting customers a behind-the-scenes look into where their products originate. • The Sedan Floral team gives dedicated tour time to each guest, making customer intimacy a high priority.