

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Cultivating Profits

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The relationship between wholesale growers and independent garden centers (IGCs) is crucial in today's economy and for supporting people's love of landscapes and gardening. Building a solid partnership between IGCs and wholesalers fosters trust and enables effective coordination in inventory management, order fulfillment and pricing strategies.

Pictured: Native and pollinator trees and shrubs are still trending, so wholesalers who offer these and other trending products will provide a better service to their IGC customers.

And the relationship doesn't end at the sale. As growers develop relationships with their IGC customers, they learn about garden centers' pain points and help them with marketing and product inventory.

More than trees & shrubs

Marc McCormack, chief sales manager with Bailey Nurseries, said, "We listen, we care and we take our customers' needs to heart. At the end of the day, we value the needs of our customers and the role we play in making their business stronger."

Sonya Westervelt from Saunders Brothers said her wholesale nursery works hard to ensure that every IGC they service has something to offer their customers. She also emphasizes the relational part of Saunders Brothers with their customers.

"We use pre-booking in the fall and especially in spring to secure limited products for our top customers. We don't follow a 'first come, first served' mentality in this; we want to be sure we can get some new products (and high-demand products) to any IGC (that) wants them," Sonya said. "Sometimes that means our customers only receive 10 of something they may have wanted 100 of."

She also said that Saunders Brothers has a team of outside sales reps who visit with their IGC customers face-to-face.

"This allows us to see what's selling, what's not. This informs our production decisions for future sales. We look at the open spaces in a garden center to determine what used to be there and make recommendations on what an

IGC can fill it with, based on our availability,” she explained.

“We have dedicated territory account representatives who work closely with not only wholesale growers, but cut flower growers, e-commerce companies and IGC customers as well,” said Spring Meadow Nursery’s Sales Manager Tony Thom. “With that being said, the majority of our direct customer base consists of wholesale growers; however, we actively ‘connect the dots’ between our customers and retailers.”

Spring Meadow Nursery often takes their wholesale grower customers with them to visit IGC customers.

“We oftentimes have direct communication with the retailers to implement specific programs, destinations, promotional support and then deliver the information to their supplier,” said Tony.

For example, Spring Meadow Nursery provides a product support portfolio for the Proven Winners ColorChoice brand to help IGCs sell.

“We’re unique in that we have a large team of marketing specialists that create pull-through marketing campaigns to increase awareness at the retail level. These national and regional campaigns create excitement around our plants and bring customers to the doors of the IGCs that we have identified as carrying Proven Winners ColorChoice,” said Advertising & PR Specialist Natalie Carmolli.

Danny Gouge of Willoway Nurseries Inc. said that his sales team works hard with their IGC customers to develop relationships to understand their specific needs. “Once we understand the needs, we all work together as a team at Willoway with them to develop solutions for success,” he said.

Danny explained the Willoway team shares what looks good through weekly dock videos posted on their website, which they share in emails and through social media.

“Customers love this! It helps them to get a visual and ideas for things that they may not have thought of ordering. Our sales team and logistics team then work to get the product to them on a timely basis, so they have the product and do not miss out on sales,” he explained, saying the quick turnaround time also allows IGCs to take advantage of seasonal color and keep the displays looking fresh and exciting.

Prides Corner Farms takes a different approach to selling trees, shrubs and other plant products to IGCs. They love branded programs, and as a licensed grower for many brands, they offer IGCs the best new genetics while driving traffic to their garden centers with consumer advertising.

Tim Kane, marketing manager for Prides Corner, explains the company’s selling process: “Our goal is to grow a wide selection of flowering and shade trees, along with the widest selection of shrubs, so that our IGC customers can find everything they need from one grower.”

Indeed, Prides Corner grows over 2,000 SKUs of shrubs and trees, and their growers work hard to find the best shrubs and trees for IGCs customers.

“We make it easy for IGCs to find all the high-quality plants they need at one grower, and our state-of-the-industry logistics allow us to ship their plants exactly when they need them and as often as they need them,” he said.

IGCs also can buy smaller batches of trees and shrubs from Prides Corner as needed, so there’s no need to overbuy or overstock, and they can restock quickly.

Some best practice advice

- **Train and educate:** Bailey Nurseries creates tools that other growers and re-wholesalers can use to educate their IGC customers. “At the end of the day, it’s important to make it as easy for garden center employees as possible, especially during peak season, to quickly grasp the product and then sell it to the consumer,” Marc said.

- **Serve local regions:** In that case, these local wholesalers and growers should be able to send trees and shrubs quickly as IGCs call in their re-orders.

- **Provide clear and consistent communication:** “One of the ways we elevate our communications at Bailey is the commitment to and investment in national market research, providing broader intelligence that we can share with all channels where we supply products,” Marc said.

- **Supply lots of photos and videos:** As you know, a picture is worth 1,000 words, and Sonya said they take many crop shots to showcase their products.

“This isn’t just for what’s blooming; customers need to see what a freshly pruned holly looks like too,” she said.

- **Give accurate measurements:** “A 3-gallon shrub does not always equal a 3-gallon shrub. The more information you give your buyers, the more confidence they will have in purchasing,” said Sonya.

- **Tell the story so the buyers know the full life of a shrub or a tree:** “We use trials to gain information about plants. How they hold in production, if they overwinter in the ground, how frequently they need to be pruned to be maintained,” said Sonya.

- **Send samples to IGC reps:** “The information and experience form a narrative that we can share with customers about our experience with a plant. Everyone feels more confident about a purchase (or not) having heard someone else’s experience,” Sonya explained.



- **Stock up on best sellers:** Tony and Natalie believe growers should stock up—but don’t just focus—on the bestsellers. Sell the benefits and features where you provide solutions to some of the most frustrating things consumers face in the garden. And encourage IGCs to have displays that speak to a tree or shrub’s features and benefits.

Pictured: Branded shrubs and trees offer better genetics and recognizability, but also encourage your retail customers to offer a variety of different cultivars.

- **Encourage IGCs to carry stock that addresses current landscaping problems,** such as drought-tolerant shrubs for areas with water restrictions.

- **Learn about your customers’ pain points and provide them with solutions:** “Creating a mindset of helping rather than selling can result in more sales,” said Natalie.

- **Supply displays with fresh products:** Encourage customers to keep changing displays with fresh products to garner repeat visits.

- **Keep up with trends:** Native and pollinator trees and shrubs are still trending, especially as consumers want to be more eco-friendly in their home landscapes.

- **Sell the benefits, not just the features:** Use good signage that lists the woody plants’ features so consumers can make informed buying decisions when the IGC staff is super busy.

- **Introduce IGCs to new genetics and recognizability that brands offer:** Tim said that in addition to selling new genetics and brand recognition, make it your goal to simplify buying and marketing for IGCs.

The relationship is the secret sauce to selling success in the wholesale and garden retail spaces. Develop those IGC relationships to grow healthy and vibrant specimens while helping your customers sell your plant products. **GT**

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