

# Garden Center Symposium Greet First Storm of the Season

Walter Cullen, Knupper's Nursery and Landscape

Country Springs Hotel, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, was host to the 48<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Garden Center Symposium on January 11-12, just ahead of the first winter snowstorm. Over 170 people representing retail and industry from Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota attended.

The Symposium, a group of Midwest garden center firms and suppliers, was established in 1964. It provides outstanding educational seminars, featuring nationally and internationally renowned speakers. Seminar topics are based on hot, industry trends and attendee requests. The Trade Show and facility provide the ideal atmosphere for in-depth discussion, networking, vendor communication and socializing.

This was my first time attending and I really enjoyed the concentrated quality of the event in the socially intimate setting. Here, in chronological order, is my summary of the proceedings.

Kicking off the seminars was **Bob Negen, of WhizBang! Training** Tapping his experience as a successful small business owner, Bob instructed the group on how to "Turn Your Staff into Selling Machines ... ramp up customer service to keep 'em coming back".

Key point: Good marketing doesn't cost, it pays!

20% of your customers account for 80% of your business, therefore:

1. Get new customers.
2. Increase their average sale.
3. Increase their number of transactions.

In his second session, "Explode Your Sales ... Marketing doesn't have to break your bank", Bob focused on the sales staff.

Key point: Good selling is not being pushy, good selling is a service!

4 Keys to Sales Success:

1. Have a selling system.
2. Create a sales training manual.
3. Coach to statistics (avg. sale, avg. items per sale, sales vol. per hour).
4. Hold your team accountable.

In his presentation "Targeting Your Media ... Does your media really speak to your customers", **Barry Callen** did reviews of media that attendees had volunteered. Asking the question, "What is the greatest percentage variance a good ad can have over a bad one?" Barry revealed the difference can be as much as 600%, with bad ads actually causing reductions in sales in some instances.

Americans receive on average 300 to 6000 selling messages a day, therefore:

1. To get rich, find your niche.
2. Do something different, stand out.
3. Say something worth caring about.
4. Current customers are low hanging fruit, stay in contact.

5. Stand for something or you'll fall down.
6. Prioritize your message – get to the point fast.
7. Don't try to change people – build on what they believe.
8. No B.S. – Don't brag or over promise.
9. Promise benefit – what's in it for me?
10. Use a creative idea.

**The Flower Factory**, a perennial grower and retailer located in Oregon, Wisconsin, was profiled by owner Nancy Nedveck. With “the largest selection in the Midwest”, they feature 4,000 varieties of “new, better and best perennials”. Open to the public from April 1<sup>st</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup>, The Flower Factory has a narrow window in which to maximize retail sales. The heavy use of wonderful, hand-painted signage, creation of beautiful display and demonstration gardens, and the availability of a staff of passionate gardeners, gives The Flower Factory the edge they need for success in their niche.

**Barry Roberts**, Program Manager & Webmaster, UW-Madison, Small Business Development Center, presented “Small Businesses and the Web ...Are you taking advantage of what's available to you?” The Web can be used to Inform, Engage and Sell to your customers. But who are they and how do they use the Web? This will be changing in the future!

Trends for 2012: Increases in ...

1. Social media use ex. Facebook
2. Local media ex. Yelp
3. Mobile media ex. Apps and searches

In 2011 there was a 400% increase in number of mobile searches.

Website Best Practices

1. Engage visitors to do more than look.
2. Create visceral impression with photos/video.
3. Show who you are and how you are different.
4. Update, update, update
5. Use analytics and feedback to improve.
6. Staff appropriately.

Wednesday night's program included a live auction, one of the events benefitting The Garden Center Symposium scholarship and a lot of Fun! This year's scholarship was presented to Matthew Wied, a junior at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls.

The auction was followed by **Roundtable discussions** with the seminar speakers. This was an amazing, literally “sit on the couch with” opportunity to engage the speakers in a very intimate and in-depth way.

Day 2 began with back to back presentations by **Ian Baldwin**. In his presentation, “Are You Still Relevant to Your Customers? ... how do you make sure you are?”, Ian shared his summary of The 2011 National Gardening Survey.

The gardening industry is changing dramatically. The 10+ year decline has been steady, 2.5% per year. From 2005 to 2010, 11 million households have stopped gardening. Average

household spending dropped from \$532 per year to \$355 per year, during the strongest 11 year period for home equity loans ever. The industry is highly dependent on consumers with college education, over 55 years of age and earning 2 times the national average. This is changing quickly.

What to do? A Dual Approach:

1. Continue to serve the Boomers as they down size, adapt to a fixed income and a change in pace – their consumption is driving the industry.
2. Develop products, supplies and programs that are relevant to the under 45 year olds.

In his second offering, "Making It Easy for Your Customer to Spend More Money ... they will want to leave their money with you!", Mr. Baldwin again shared data from the National Gardening Survey.

In the last 10 years, household income has been flat. Yet, retail spending has exploded. How can gardening get more of the pie?

Silent Selling:

1. Plan traffic patterns, understand the value of "Hot" locations, change things up.
2. Group similar inventory items, yet present tie-ins; reduce sku's and therefore confusion.
3. Displays must attract and hold attention, create buying impulses, answer questions/create confidence, suggest tie-ins and combinations, and be shop-able.
4. Think for the customer, present "kits" for success, be there for them.
5. Make it standard procedure.

The Goal: Relevance to and enjoyment for the customer.

The afternoon session brought the close of the Trade Show, and of the Silent Auction, another contributor to the Scholarship Fund.

"Tricks of the Trade" opened the afternoon. Attendees shared ideas that have worked for their Garden Center at an open microphone, with the opportunity for others to ask questions. The winning idea – attendees voted between talks - was *Hosting a Pink Day*, Sargent's on 2<sup>nd</sup>, Rochester, MN. (a complete list will be in the next newsletter)

The final speaker was Chris Beytes, Editor and Publisher of Grower Talks. Chris shared a power-point version of his online newsletter in, "Acres Online Live".

During the 60 minute around the world tour, Chris gave a review of the 2011 poinsettia crop, and a preview of the Spring Trials annual shows on the west coast. He also did a profile of Rozalia Van Wingerden, a highly successful mixed container designer, discussed medical cannabis, showed the world record hanging basket display (2,968!), gave an alert on Impatiens Downey Mildew, and talked Social Media.

In his show, Chris made stops in China, where they are building an International Plant Science and Plant Technology campus including a 300 acre Greenhouse facility; Germany, at the IPM show in Essen, world's largest horticultural show; Holland, at Hortiweek where 3 shows were running; and Australia, with discussions on the strict attention to safety, and the extreme usage of tags (they sell before plants show color).

Finally, Chris told of an alliance between the OFA and the ANLA. This is good for the industry from the strength in resources it will have, as well as in the voice to government (lobby).

And that was the Symposium. Not bad for a 2 day affair!