

Event Central

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For garden retailers, the holidays can be tricky. Too much inventory and expense and the months break even (or worse). However, if coupled with some key events and an ability to create memories for customers that keep them coming back, they can be an effective way to float the ship through the lean winter months.

To that end, we talked to two retailers who have been in the memory-making business for many years to see how they handle the crowds, strategize their events and what opportunity they see for the future. One specializes in fall, while the other has a hold on Christmas and winter celebrations.

Fall is for Festivals

Burger Farm and Garden Center in Newtown, Ohio (on the east side of Cincinnati), has a long and storied history, starting in 1904 as a dairy farm, and then eventually evolving into a fresh produce farm mid-century.

"I'm 57 and my teenage years were spent picking sweet corn," says fourth-generation co-owner Ken Burger, who partners with his two brothers Lynn and Russ Burger and sister Janice Bell to run the operation. "We would pick about 1,000 dozen ears of corn per day."

Today, the operation encompasses 55 total acres, including about 35 acres that had been sold for mineral rights and was mined in the 1980s, leaving a crater spanning the entire area 65-ft. deep. The Burgers re-purchased the property and the chasm is almost filled after 25 years of effort. That is the key to expanding the Fall Festival that has exploded in popularity, drawing up to 35,000 visitors in only five weekends in September and October. About 5,000 of that are programs specifically for school kids and scout troops.

The history of the place is instrumental, too, in its street cred. Located just inside the I-275 loop around Cincinnati means the farm is actually inside the city. But because of its size and history, it's still able to feel like escaping to the farm. And that's vital for any agri-tourism business. Ken talks about nearby attractions of King's Island Amusement Park, the Cincinnati Zoo and Coney Island Cincinnati, all within 30 miles, and all who have some kind of fall and Halloween-related events.

"We have to be different from them and offer something they can't get there," Ken says. "There's a symbiotic relationship with farms and fall; people want to get out to the farm. They want to take a hayride, pick their pumpkin, give their kids something to do and just have some time to spend together."

The Fall Festival is going on 40-years strong and has grown year by year. This year, they'll offer hayrides out to the pumpkin patch, a puppet show performed on the hour, Pumpkinland (a building that's a walk-through, self-guided tour of animated pumpkin characters), farm animals, pony rides, carnival rides, live music, food, carnival games, a straw maze and large play area, along with munchkin pumpkin chunkin' (kiddos launch mini-pumpkins at targets with a water-balloon launch), a paintball shooting gallery, pedal cars, water ducky races and more.

How did they get inspiration for all those ideas and the new ones they plan on implementing next year? They visited other large farms with Fall Festivals, including Vala's Pumpkin Patch in Omaha, Nebraska, and Shady Brook Farm, ironically in Newtown, Pennsylvania.

"We came back from there filled with ideas and the thing we love about it is the activities they have to offer, everything is so simple. You didn't have to go spend millions of dollars and it didn't have to be shiny or pretty," Ken says. "The kids can come out and run, jump and climb."

So what's on tap for next year once the new/old land is available? A 2-acre corn maze, pig races, more animals, a mega maze that requires working through obstacles to get through it, mini zip-lines and more.

Ken says the carnival rides will likely go away and there will be more of a focus on physical activity. "Our intent as we grow this thing is to do things



that are family oriented," he adds. "We want to stay with that country feel; you can't get that unless you want to drive for an hour."

They also plan on being open during the week and targeting corporate events in the evenings, possibly for bonfires or night hayrides. Right now, admission is \$3 per person with those 2 and under free. Once inside, some of the activities are pay as you go, like the carnival and pony rides and games. The family is looking to charge a flat rate next year with most activities included.

For the Burgers, the Fall Festival helps them keep those long-time employees who are vital to the garden center during the spring and summer on hand and still working in the fall. All told, the festival is about 10% to 12% of the operation's total revenue, with the main driver still the garden center. They do hire between 30 and 35 seasonal employees to help with the fall festival, along with the normal full-time staff of 12.

Another major part of a successful fall festival, along with having many activities for all ages, is parking. Burger Farm & Garden Center has 60 paved parking spots for the garden center, but that doesn't accommodate the influx of crowds on fall weekends. They also have a gravel area that can park 600 cars.

Now, let's talk product. Of course, you must have pumpkins for a Fall Fest. "A pumpkin's not just a pumpkin," Ken notes, adding the quality is vital. He contracts with growers in Ohio and Michigan to receive varieties that have long stems and deep color, as well as white ones that are becoming popular for weddings and decorations. All told, they sold 96,000 lbs. of carving/decorating pumpkins, 15,000 of the Jack Be Little mini pumpkins and 30,000 pie pumpkins last year, as well as an untold number of gourds, decorative squash, acorn squash and Indian corn.

What else do you need? A good hayride is vital, as is a good quality apple cider (Editor's note: a good apple cider donut doesn't hurt, either).

Winter Wonderland



One Feeney's customer told employees, "It's not Christmas until we have been to Feeney's!" That's because the Bucks County, Pennsylvania, retailer specializes in the winter holidays to the point of it accounting for almost 50% of its sales.

The garden center and gift operation brings in customers with lots of events, the biggest of which is the Rewards Night where they host only rewards customers at the end of October, says Janet Ciccone, co-owner at Feeney's. "It's invitation only and we host over 800 customers," she says, adding they feature specials with some of the lowest prices of the season, wine, butlered food, music and 10% off their total sale, which is pretty special considering Feeney's rarely discounts during the holidays. "To keep costs down we prepare everything in-house. It is all hands on deck. Every employee and (then) some are needed to man this event."

Other events during the holidays include live animals, decorating seminars (like tree fluffing, tablescaping, containers and bow making, among others), manufacturer reps and free hand-dipped ice cream from a local dairy. They also have Kids Night with story-telling, a craft, specials and an early visit with Santa, along with hand-dipped ice cream. Each event pulls in around 100 people throughout the weekend.

Of course, many families arrange their holiday schedule around their Santa visit at Feeney's, and after 30 years, they finally decided to charge \$5, with the proceeds going to the Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House. They've raised more than \$10,000 through the Santa visits.

One of the biggest draws is how Feeney's creates a true winter wonderland from ceiling to floor, says Feeney's Designer Frank D'Aguzzo, with lights, decorations and gifts everywhere. "The spirit of the holiday is just everywhere. No one else does it like us," he adds. "We are lucky to have built such a respected reputation. We also have 25,000 square feet of exterior space for our plants, live and artificial goods and a village backdrop for children to visit with Santa.

"It's a holiday tradition for three generations of families."

The garden center and gift store has a simply enormous display of Department 56 and is one of only a few dealers in the area that offers the complete lineup of the decorative villages. Feeney's features a 35-ft. by 6-ft. enclosed interactive display of all the villages and their houses.

One of the key elements to holiday sales that Janet points out is sourcing materials properly, adding inventory control and effective marketing are two of the larger pitfalls to the season. They try to source local vendors when possible, like with the ice cream (from a local dairy), the Byers' Choice products (the company is 30 minutes away), a local soy candle line and cut Christmas trees from a farm a couple of hours away in Pennsylvania. For the rest, they attend gift shows in Atlanta, New York and even in Europe.

Another example of sourcing vendors is working with National Tree on some artificial trees that are made exclusively for Feeney's. That's a department that's getting a little more love as it becomes a growth opportunity.

"We decorate over 40 themed trees; we know what works for the homeowner," Frank says. "They can see each tree empty and decorated in our displays so they know what they can and can't do with each style."

The other key to success, and a big pitfall if done incorrectly, is hiring enthusiastic holiday help and having the proper staffing amount. "We are very service-oriented—our store is large, so we need to help our customer coordinate and navigate their decorating and gift-giving hopes with all the resources our holiday store has to offer," Janet says. "We truly are a one-stop holiday location."

Some of that holiday fun continues throughout the year, too. The Department 56 display is permanent, as are the Jim Shore and Byers' Choice

offerings. It truly keeps the holiday spirit (and Feeney's) in the hearts and minds of customers year round. **GP**