

# Marketing Success

Hoerr Nursery never stops looking for creative ways to meet its core customers' needs.

Peoria, Ill., and the surrounding areas.

Although its roots are in landscaping and sod growing, as the business has evolved, the retail garden center has surpassed both the contracting and the growing units, according to president and CEO Nate Hoerr. "It's kind of funny that something that started as an offshoot – the retail side – does account for more than half the sales of the business, which is really very exciting," he says.

## Achieving The Vision

It all came together when the management team decided the company's lack of focus – being too diversified – was actually bringing it down. As a result, they decided to shift the company's priorities, limiting sod production and building a new greenhouse two years ago strictly for retailing annuals, perennials and related items. But Hoerr is quick to point out there's more to it than that. "I don't want to give the idea that we're just a retail garden center, because that's not our vision," he says. "Our vision is to be a horticultural service company."

Hoerr achieves this vision by being a single-source provider for homeowners, offering everything they need – the plants and the services – which Hoerr admits can be a double-edged sword, as well as one of the biggest challenges for the business. "We can be a retail center, we can mow their lawn, we can fertilize their grass and we can service their sprinkler system," he says. "But as far as the challenges go, as we continue to

Teamwork is a key component of Hoerr Nursery's success. Employees follow the E<sup>3</sup> mantra: Make it Easy, Enjoyable and Excellent for both customers and peers.

by Ann-Marie Conroy, Associate Editor  
amconroy@meistermedia.com

The world changes, and changing with it isn't always easy. But those who adapt end up on top. That's the case for Hoerr Nursery (pronounced "hair"), which started back in 1926 when David August Hoerr decided to get a truck and deliver coal to support his family of 14.

Now in its third generation, Hoerr Nursery is a thriving grower-retailer providing top-notch horticultural services to customers in its home base of

## Hoerr Nursery

**President And CEO:** Nate Hoerr

**Location:** Peoria, Ill.

**Size:** 300 acres of nursery

**Web site:** [www.hoerrnursery.com](http://www.hoerrnursery.com)

grow, it becomes harder and harder to find resources or capital to make sure we're putting it in the right direction."

There's not a lot of opportunity for Hoerr Nursery to get off track, though. The company's executive leadership team meets weekly to determine both long-term and short-term strategies, paying close attention to the opportunities and challenges presenting themselves at any given time. That's how the new retail greenhouse came to be, according to Hoerr, who says growing manager Bryon Rinckenberger was key in making the new structure happen. "Bryon and his team for a long time have been visiting other greenhouses, nurseries and garden centers and assembling a list of best practices. It became apparent to him probably more than five years ago that we really needed a retail greenhouse," Hoerr says. "It was really his vision of what it could do to the retail environment, so he continually pushed and put that on our list of asset additions. It's really been one of the best retail business decisions we've made."

The old hoop houses Hoerr previously used for annuals and other plant material made shopping and pushing carts awkward. Now customers can shop more comfortably, which marketing director Jane Mason says has been instrumental in helping grow the business. "It's a beautiful,



## A Bright Idea



During Hoerr Nursery's "Leap Into Spring" event, which was held in February to take advantage of the leap year and encourage people to visit the store earlier in the season, marketing manager Jane Mason overheard some of the women talking about a breakfast they have together each year to discuss their garden plans for the spring. Jane took this idea and ran with it, holding Hoerr Nursery's first ever Idea Breakfast this year. Employees from all areas of the business – landscape, design, lawn maintenance, horticulturists and pond specialists – gathered at the nursery to answer questions and offer advice while attendees enjoyed a continental breakfast provided by the nursery. Each employee's specialty was designated by a symbol on the name badges. Pond experts wore lily pad name tags, for example, which made it easy for customers to know where to direct their questions.

"People loved it. They showed up early before we opened and were standing in line, eager to ask questions," Mason says. "Although we didn't have huge sales that day, they were significantly better than the week before, and it did generate a lot of ripple effect down into the season, so the Idea Breakfast was great."

smooth concrete floor, which also gives us the advantage of, for any customers who have limited mobility, we are extremely accessible," she says. "I have noticed a large increase in customers in wheelchairs shopping with families, which is a huge benefit to the families. They can come in, stroll around this marvelous greenhouse and see all of the fabulous things we have to offer." She adds that retail sales have been fantastic the last two years. In 2006, the store saw its first million-dollar May, and that trend continues.

### Right Person, Right Place

Hoerr has the advantage of having several horticulturists on staff, as well, which allows the garden center to carry more unique and unusual plants. "We're recognized for our horticultural expertise," says Mason. "Our knowledge base is very well recognized, and certainly within the hardcore gardening demographic."

The management team is a strong proponent of the "right person, right place"

**Hoerr has several horticulturists on staff, which allows the store to carry unique plants in addition to the staple varieties.**

philosophy and is aware that while the horticulturists might be comfortable dealing with the technical aspect of the plants, they might not be comfortable working with the customers. To keep a good balance, management pinpoints workers' skill sets and places them in appropriate positions. They've also instilled the E<sup>3</sup> (E cubed) philosophy in all the employees' minds. "E<sup>3</sup> means 'easy, enjoyable and excellent' to us, and it's kind of our motto we keep tattooed on our brains," says Mason. "What we're trying to do is make it easy, enjoyable and excellent for the customers, but also for your fellow employees. If there's a way you can lend a hand or pitch in or handle this customer while they're dealing with another customer – it's this mentality about pitching in that is the E<sup>3</sup> mantra."

### A Smooth Transition

It's said that most businesses don't make it to the second generation, so Hoerr's continued success in its third is no small feat. But getting there took careful consideration and planning. Transitioning a family business isn't rocket science – it's harder. The emotion involved in dealing with family

members can make a smooth transition tricky, so Hoerr enlisted outside help to ease the process.

When the time came to transition the business to the next generation, there were seven family members involved. “We made the collective decision to bring an outside consulting firm in to evaluate the gift sets of all the family members and then come up with a strategy on how to do the managerial transfer of power, and also an accounting firm to handle the financial side of it,” Hoerr explains. “We came up with a managerial plan that we put in place immediately, which outlined what the family members’ duties were going to be, and then we actually deferred the financial transition of ownership until about two years after that, so it was kind of a wait-and-see mentality.”

Hoerr says seeking outside advice for the transition didn’t solve all the problems, but it certainly helped. “If anything, the outside consultant allowed us to go into some waters we might not have gone into alone,” he says.

### Masters of Marketing

While the garden center hasn’t done any branding in the general sense of the term, it has several proprietary programs customers can’t get anywhere else. Mason considers these programs to be a big part of the Hoerr brand. One such program is Hardy Bucks, a bonus buck program that takes the place of a traditional loyalty program. “It’s something that is branded for us, and I’m real big on that,” says Mason. “I like to have programs that people know they can only get here.”

But Hoerr’s brand encompasses more than that. The garden center is always exploring new ways to get its name out in front of its core customers and sees the Web as a perfect opportunity to do just that. The nursery recently launched something called VIP E-nouncements – a newsletter that verges on loyalty program. If customers sign up to be on Hoerr’s e-mail list, they become VIPs and receive VIP E-nouncements in their inboxes once a week during the spring season and every other week throughout the rest of the year. VIP E-nouncements include special offers two to four days before they’re available to the

general public. “The whole Web opportunity is a huge business challenge as we see it,” Mason says. “It’s not only an opportunity to communicate in an inexpensive way with our existing customers, but also to hook into a new, younger demographic, or even the same age demographic but someone who didn’t have this vision of being a gardener or familiarity with nursery products.”

The business has even bigger plans for using the Web to its advantage, too. While Hoerr’s current Web site is already quite robust, Hoerr says they’re “about ready to inject steroids into it.” The company is



activities. But she quickly realized it wasn’t the most lucrative time investment for the nursery. Because her background is numbers and profit oriented, she questioned whether the event was actually driving sales for the business. “If our core customer is taking care of four kids who are standing in line for face painting, she’s not buying anything,” Mason says. “And how many employees are tied up doing face painting when they could be helping her select a container, select a hanging basket or helping her load things into her vehicle? It gets down to a practical matter.”

Hoerr has since streamlined its events

looking for e-commerce opportunities that will help leverage the business and make the Web site a one-stop source of information and products for gardeners. “We’re excited about it,” Hoerr says. “We want to begin to look through our customers’ eyes, and that’s certainly how the world is moving – instantaneous, microwave service, so although you can’t always do that with live plants, we want to try and set the bar. We definitely want to have a good Web offering, but at the end of the day, we want it to drive customers to our door.”

But with all the unique events and promotions it hosts, Hoerr Nursery doesn’t need to worry too much about getting customers in the door. Before Mason came on board to handle the marketing, the garden center held a large fall festival that included face painting, apple bobbing and other family-friendly

### The garden center holds a host of special events to draw customers in.

and catered them more toward the store’s core customers – women. Girl’s Night Out is just one event the garden center hosts each year, and this year, it will feature a chef cooking with herbs and veggies.

“Those events where the customer gets really jazzed and excited are also a big lift for your employees, especially at the end of May or June when they’ve been working like dogs,” Mason says. She notes, too, that when it comes to marketing, sometimes it pays to go out on a limb and try something new. “You’re not going to hit a home run every time, but if you’re not taking risks, then you’re not gutsy enough – you’re not competitive enough,” she says. “For me, in terms of marketing, it could not be more fun than being here at Hoerr Nursery.” TGC