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Plenty To Offer

With improved events and well-attended seminars, Ed and Tina Bemis have cut down on the number of empty-handed customers at Bemis Farms Nursery.

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Two-hundred well-attended seminars? Check.

Four reputable events? Check.

A gardening show on local cable? Check.

And don't forget about the continued work with respected industry consultants.

Bemis Farms Nursery's Ed and Tina Bemis like being successful garden center owners, and this husband and wife duo will be the first to tell you it's not always easy.

"It all comes down to paying attention," Tina says. The Bemises recognize big picture thinking, corrected mistakes and a little outside help as keys to their success.

Lesson Learned

Overwhelming and unsatisfying are two words that best describe the first event held at Bemis Farms Nursery.

"It was the first time we had 500 customers here all at the same time and we were really proud of that," Tina says. "But at the end of the day, we hadn't done any more sales than the year before on the same week."

Despite the foot traffic and new faces, it didn't take long for Ed and Tina to realize too much effort was put into the event to not make a profit.

"We're off the beaten path, and I always felt like if I can only get people here, they would buy something as long as they saw the place," Tina says. "But that's not always the case. Sure, you can get people here,

Bemis Farms Nursery

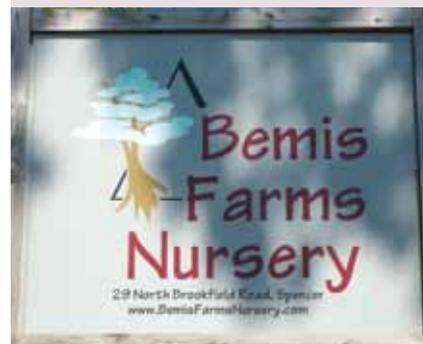
Owners: Ed & Tina Bemis

Location: Spencer, Mass.

Size: 4 retail acres, 2 growing acres

Annual Sales: \$1 million

Website: BemisFarmsNursery.com



give them something free and they will turn around and leave if you haven't given them something they really wanted."

Ed adds, "That was a big lesson for us. Any of the particular events we have, Tina has tried to tailor our product mix or at least have a particular product that gets people to buy something. If we can't do that, shame on us for not offering something they wanted."

Bemis' Easter Egg Hunt is a great example of offering their customers something they want and at the right price point, too.

"I came up with a little Easter bunny food garden kit for \$3.99," explains Tina. "We have 800 kids come in for the hunt

and if we can pluck a quarter of the people who might not have made any purchase that day into at least buying that for their kids, we can capture their name, address and e-mail with our point-of-sale."

Ed says it's all about getting their customers to open their wallets and once they do, other seasonal items become likelier purchases. In this case, Easter lilies and daffodils can quickly turn a \$4 transaction into \$25.

"Having an item like the Easter bunny food garden kit is sort of the entrée to their wallet; it's not the full course meal," he says.

Down To A Science

For events, the more you host doesn't always mean the better, and that couldn't be any truer for the Bemises.

"If you have one or two events, make them really good," Tina says. "People don't expect us to have 20 rotating events every year. They're happy that they come every year to the Easter Egg Hunt." Tina says the hunt is her biggest and easiest event to host, but it wasn't always as profitable as it is today.

"Once the kids are done hunting for eggs, parents line up at the register with their Easter plants and if the line's too

long, they end up leaving without buying anything, because I haven't made it easy for them to make a purchase," she explains. "I needed to figure out a way to keep the kids around a little longer after the hunt."

Then Tina remembered her network of contacts – specifically her ties to the local 4-H Club.

"As business owners, we all have our circle of contacts," she says. "It's a win-win. You just can't exploit them." The 4-H Club was able to bring in their petting zoo for the event, but also promote their summer camp program.

Ed adds, "We're thrilled to have them, because then we don't have to have a petting zoo 364 days a year, and they get public exposure to an audience of 800 perfectly aged kids at their fingertips."



Getting Them Excited

While you may be able to count the number of events at Bemis Farms Nursery on one hand, the same would be impossible to do when it comes to the Bemis' lineup of seminars.

At 200 classes strong, it's no secret Tina loves to teach and interact with her customers, but she's not the only one. From high-school aged staffers to husband Ed, most of the Bemis Farms team has at least one hand in the garden center's educational offerings.

Tina says her entire staff is well-versed in creating container gardens using the four elements: spillers, thrillers, fillers and chillers (a cool foliage plant).

Registration for seminars is available in-store, but also online on the Bemis Farms website (BemisFarmsNursery.com), which benefits the garden center in two ways.

Guided Tours

The self-guided headphone tours found at many museums and zoos caught the attention of Ed Bemis. So much so, he is currently working to implement a similar educational (and fun) system at Bemis Farms Nursery. The actual set up is called a cell-phone tour.

"In today's world where everyone has a cell-phone on them, customers like to be told the story, but not necessarily read the story on a sign," says Bemis.

When things are fully up and running, customers at Bemis Farms will be able to dial a number on their cell phone to receive a personalized message about a given variety.

"With the cell-phone tours, we can inject a little personality and enthusiasm into it, which can be hard to do on a 5x7 sign."



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“Online ordering works out tremendously because customers have to give us their contact information and

they’ve already committed with a dollar amount, which with that kind of commitment, they’re more likely to attend the class,” Tina says.

The hands-on seminars at Bemis Farms are what Tina calls “make and takes,” with prices ranging from \$29.95 to \$149.

Ed says the classes Tina puts together exposes customers to something new and different in a controlled comfortable environment. “It might be a little out of their comfort zone, but then they do it with 20 other ladies and it becomes a fun activity that they bring home and become the talk of the neighborhood,” he says. “And then somebody says, you didn’t really do that yourself did you? And then they’re proud of it. And then they might push the envelope a little further. It gives us the perfect opportunity to connect with them on an emotional and horticultural level.”

Ed Says:

“In the industry, there’s the pro-guarantee group and the anti-guarantee group.

The anti-guarantee group makes it sound like customers want their plants to fail so they can get a new one. That’s just not true. They aren’t doing it wrong on purpose. The value of one sale is dwarfed by the value of that customer over time.”



A New Perspective

Another strong connection the Bemises have developed has been with a number of industry consultants.

“We started working with (garden center consultant) Judy Sharpton about nine years ago,” Ed says. “We’re a small garden center and we needed some advice on our layout. We were too close to it. We needed a better set of eyes on it.” In addition to their work with Sharpton, Tina is a graduate of Ian Baldwin’s Garden Center University and this past spring, the Bemises have signed on to work with consultant Robert Hendrickson and The Garden Center Group. Those efforts are already bearing fruit, Ed says.

When considering the expertise of an industry consultant, Ed says you can’t go in with a “come help me attitude.” He adds that it’s important to know some of your problems ahead of time and also be open-minded that problems exist. Also, before committing to one consultant, do a little homework, Tina says. “Talk with their clients. Get a feel from the garden centers they’ve worked with to see if that’s going to be a good match for you.”

Lastly, Ed says the cost of hiring a consultant isn’t as overwhelming as many people think.

“Rumors of cost are highly exaggerated and it’s just not true,” he says. “Don’t worry about feeling cheap. They understand that a good deal of us don’t have a lot of room when it comes to money. They’re willing to work with you.” TGC



More Online

For more photos and event tips from Bemis Farms Nursery, along with information about Ed and Tina’s gardening show, go to TodaysGardenCenter.com and look for the More Online logo.