

The GardenChic Life

ADVENTURES IN IGC
ENTREPRENEURIAL RETAILING

Chris Campbell | Garden Center Manager

Campbell's Garden Centers | Lincoln, NE



CHRIS CAMPBELL IS AMONG the fourth generation of leadership at Campbell's Garden Centers in Lincoln, NE. As the garden center manager, she is looked upon to help keep the business on the forefront of the latest trends - especially in the eyes of their younger customers, Gen X and Gen Y.

"I'm a 29-year-old, single woman, and I own my own home," she says. "I don't have disposable income, but I still want my home to look nice."

Drawing this demographic requires coming up with ideas, both in marketing and merchandising, that are truly outside-the-box.

"I remember walking into one of our board meetings and saying, 'I want to advertise in movie theaters' ... they all about fell off their chairs and thought I was nuts," Chris laughs. Campbell's in theater ad invited the audience to bring their movie ticket stubs to the garden center for a discount. The promotion worked - people arrived, tickets in hand, ready to shop, Chris says.

Eye for the unusual. Her vision for the unconventional extends to product buying and merchandising as well. Pottery has always been a big seller for Campbell's, but unique zinc containers have recently become a standout. Basalt fountains were a first this season and sold well, Chris says. In outdoor furniture, modern designs are popular, and smaller decorative garden accessories, especially copper

and resin outdoor clocks and thermometers, move quickly.

The guiding philosophy behind Campbell's merchandising is to help customers visualize how they can use items like these to transform their outdoor living areas.

"We merchandise our product to show people how to use it in their home," Chris explains. In one of the greenhouses is a striking patio display. The garden center paints the picture with teak tables and chairs, a large fountain, preplanted containers, tiki torches and oil table lamps.

Another of Chris' favorite displays involves a double chaise lounge with a trellis as the backdrop and two side tables as accents. "We show them how to use different cushions and throw pillows on the double chaise," Chris says. Outdoor lamps and containers full of silk flowers are the finishing touches that bring the display to life.

To remain current on the newest products and merchandising techniques, *Garden Chic* is the magazine Chris grabs first: "I love to flip through it and see what's new. I always get great ideas. The photos that demonstrate how to show products are helpful. They spark new ideas and ways of doing things."

Chris also scans consumer magazines,

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such as *Real Simple* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, then searches the Internet for the items that pique her interest.

Customers first. Customer service is a distinguishing focus for Campbell's. Planting containers has become a signature. "We'll go to a customer's home and plant their planters, or if they bring them in, we'll plant them." Around the store, preplanted containers are artfully arranged to inspire. "We try to give people design ideas that fit their lifestyle."

Much of Campbell's success comes from the close attention they pay to their customers. "We listen to them." If a customer asks for a particular product - for example, something they spotted in a magazine - Campbell's will find it or look for something similar when they go to market.

The garden center also turns to sources outside the industry for ideas on what to bring in to fulfill their customers' wish lists. The home furnishings industry provides ideas for product selection and displays, especially retailers such as Crate & Barrel, Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware, Chris says: "They see what the latest trends are. We want our merchandise to complement those trends, colors and fashions." The garden center strives to help customers accessorize their outdoor spaces with items that match the style they enjoy indoors - so that the outdoor room becomes a sort of extension of their indoor decor.

To keep the focus on customers and the sales floor busy with activity during the off season, Campbell's hosts special events. In mid-November, a Ladies Night Out invites women and men alike to enjoy wine and hors d'oeuvres as they shop for a few hours with a 20 percent discount off their purchases that evening. "We have a great turnout," Chris says.

During the first week of October, the garden center converts to what it calls a "Christmas Wonderland." The tradition started when Chris' grandparents hired their first full-time staff, and had to find a way to make the business viable year round. "They started selling ornaments off a pegboard, and now we do eight 10-foot Christmas trees," Chris says. This eye toward innovation and growth is what keeps Campbell's on the cutting edge. ■