



Crystal Cady (right), CEO designate of the Northwest Nursery Buyers Association, visits with John Christianson of Christianson's Nursery in Mount Vernon, Washington, at the 2024 Farwest Show. Cady says going to trade shows, meetings at industry organizations and even online webinars are all great ways to meet the people in the industry. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

Making connections

Building trust is key to establishing clientele base for new nurseries

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

For new retail and wholesale nurseries, one of the biggest challenges is building your network of suppliers, sales leads and vendors from scratch. From defining your goals and brands and refining your processes, the bottom line, seasoned professionals agree, is earning the trust of your new clients and partners.

“Trust is the most important factor in this business, because we grow a variable product,” said Lance Schamberger.

Schamberger, an independent sales representative in the Northwest for over 20 years, supports businesses like **J Frank Schmidt & Son Co.**, **Northwest Shade Trees** and **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas Inc.**. Being subject to so many more variables than towels or microwaves, plants are far less predictable, so sellers need to double down on consistency.

“The first step is getting customer to try you out,” he said. “The second step — and this is way harder — is making sure you deliver on your promises while mak-

ing the whole process easy.”

“It’s a business of relationships, plain and simple,” said Vinny Grasso, West Coast nursery manager for **Eason Horticultural Resources**, a Kentucky based plant brokerage. “It comes down to trust.”

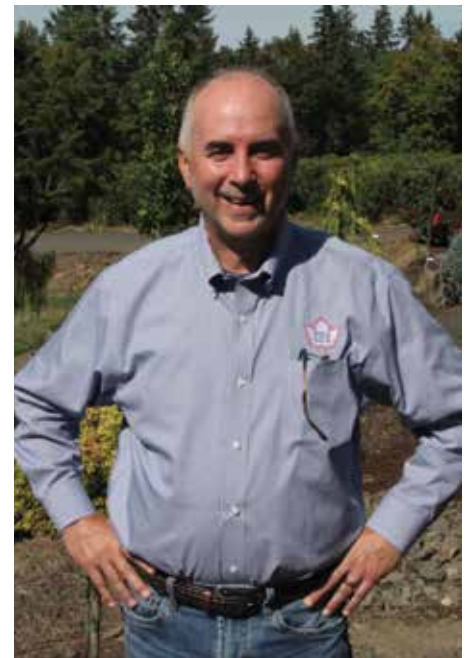
And that’s built by forging strong relationships between the end user, the customer, supplier and vendor.

Know your strengths and the market

Setting your goals and vision will help you chart your path.

“The most successful nurseries are the ones that narrow things down a little,” Schamberger said. “They figure out what their strengths are — it may not be the product, but the way they run the nursery.”

“If you don’t have a vision of what you are doing and where you are going, you will waste time and money,” said Crystal Cady, CEO-designate of the Northwest Nursery Buyers



Vinny Grasso, West Coast nursery manager for Eason Horticultural Resources, says recommends growers diversify clients geographically to allow for variable markets due to weather. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL



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Association, a member-owned cooperative of independent garden centers that coordinates group purchases of plant material. “Once you do, you’ll find mentors and wholesalers who are aligned with your vision and specialties.”

Cady has worked in both the retail and wholesale side of nurseries. She ran her nursery, Sunflower Acres Farm and Garden, and later worked as a sales representative for Skagit Gardens.

Cady took the time to study the market to determine how she could position her business.

“When I started my business one of the first things I looked at was a SWOT (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats) analysis of my competitors,” Cady said, leading her to sell the newly introduced Hort Couture line of coleus and high-end hanging baskets.

In defining your product and market, Cady recommends starting small. “For example, Groovy Plants in Ohio started very niche, focusing on what they knew they were good at, which allowed them to build a fan base. Now, they’ve got their core values and niche down and can do that in their sleep and can expand.”

“Each nurse has its own talent,” Grasso said. “I encourage growers to find their niche and try to expand on it without going too far outside their comfort zone.”

Finding new partners and clients

“Every young industry professional looking to learn more should build a great network,” Cady said. “I started small locally with Oregon Association of Nurseries chapter meetings, learned of other opportunities, and went to Cultivate in Ohio and attended a management clinic to bring me a bigger network across the country. Now I’ve built such a big spider web that people will come to me, and I can connect them to others, which builds rapport.”

Schamberger concurs that volunteering help goes a long way toward boosting long-lasting goodwill. “It’s kind of paying it forward,” he said. “If someone calls me looking for a plant, I don’t have I’ll try to help them find it. You’ve now helped them solve a problem and maybe they’ll come back to you next time.”



Lance Schamberger said regular communication — down to small details like sending an availability list out the same day each week — helps keep everyone connected.

Going to trade shows, meetings at industry organizations and even online webinars are all great ways to meet the people in the industry. Cady also recommends industry social media groups, like IGC Talk! and on Facebook, Emergent: A Group for Growing Professionals.

Steps like this help you get to know people before doing business with them, she said.

When it comes to finding your new clients and vendors, Cady recommends the OAN’s *Nursery Guide* and member directory as a resource.

While introducing yourself to potential customers or vendors that suit your market, she said, persistence pays off. If you’re a grower, “You’ve got to get your product in your car or van and drive to every target market,” Cady said.

“Nothing beats a physical introduction,” said Chamberger. “A phone call is the next best thing — cold calling basically. It’s not easy and doesn’t always work,” he said, but it is far better than an e-mail blast which is likely to vanish to a spam folder.

Understand your customers’ needs. Cady recommends wholesalers “walk the benches at local nurseries, asking about their best sellers, what customers are asking for, what are they having a hard time finding?”

Grasso recommends growers diversify clients geographically to allow for variable markets due to weather. “As a nursery you want to get your product in as many places as possible, but most smaller nurseries don’t have the internal staff to do that,” so that’s where brokerage firms like Eason and independent sales representatives like Chamberger come in. They may also act as liaison or even handle payments.

Consistency is king

Delivering on your promises is paramount — delivering the expected quality and quantity on time. Consistently. While focusing on growing quality plants is expected, logistics can’t be overlooked. “It’s the easiest way to lose a customer,” said Chamberger, and he notes, “The easiest way to make a new customer is to step in when someone else has made a mistake.”

“The product has to be consistent. Not necessarily the best of the best,” Chamberger said. He’d rather see average-quality plants sent reliably than a mixed order of mature and young plants.

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Ultimately, “price becomes maybe a third consideration, because service and quality are more important,” said Grasso.

If an issue comes up, offering credits, replacements, or refunds promptly will show you are ready to take responsibility and remedy it.

Do what you enjoy

There are a lot of vectors and details to juggle in running a retail or wholesale nursery, but ultimately, Chamberger said, “if you hone what you like doing, you’ll naturally find an existing niche. You’ll be happier, and happier people sell more plants,” said. ☺

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