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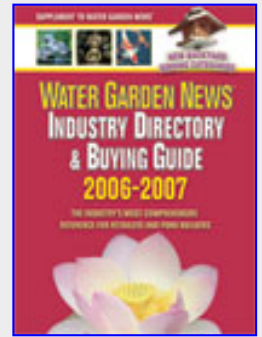
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By Tom Barthel



To keep the final flurry of sales going strong into the holiday season, many water garden businesses take on aggressive marketing strategies. Techniques include pushing winterization products and services, diversifying product lines and encouraging clients to continue as usual through the winter.

Decorating display ponds at a retail store helps attract customers during the holiday season.

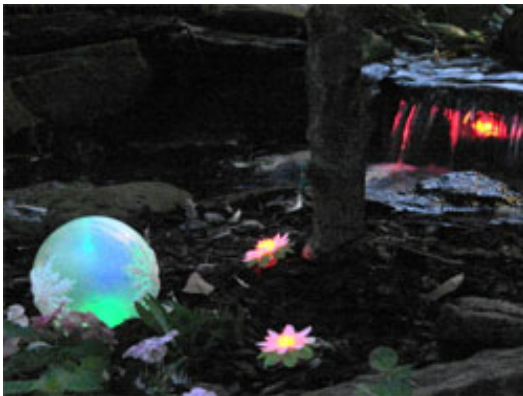
Courtesy of Pond

Headquarters

"You've got to create that fall business," says April Kent, owner of The Pond Headquarters in Acworth, Ga. "It doesn't just come to you. You've got to push it."

Winter sales offer unexpected profit streams for retailers and builders who go the extra mile.

"A lot of businesses will close down after Christmas, but we're open three days a week in January, just to let them know they can always reach us," Kent says. "You always have to be open. Don't completely close. Shorten your hours if you have to, but you can still make money."



Holiday décor items, such as decorative lights, appeal to consumers because they create the feeling of year-round use of the water garden.

Courtesy of Pond Headquarters

Some companies create this business by educating their customers about proper winter maintenance.

Investing in a mail-drop program can pay for itself, even when just a few customers turn into winterization clients. Kent says she has about 4,300 customers with ponds, so she mails out a checklist in the fall to make sure her customers are prepared.

"People will actually come into the store; they'll have their checklist, and they'll go through it with one of our pond consultants," she says. "It will generate \$150 to \$300 worth of income from that one visit. It can also generate leads for pond cleanings or closings."

Other retailers create in-store marketing materials to prepare customers for the winter pond season.

"We prepare an overall fact sheet on what to do for the winter season," says David Snow, water garden/nursery manager of Oakland Nursery and Garden Center in Columbus, Ohio. "It has suggestions on what can be used during the fall and winter season."

Water garden winterization products such as salt, stress coat, thermometers, waders and gloves tend not to vary much from manufacturer to manufacturer, says Mick Masterson, co-owner of Masterson's Aquatic Nursery and Garden Center in East Aurora, N.Y.

Trial and error, along with a little networking, narrow the options and can help retailers decide which products to carry.

"I'm a member of the IPPCA, so it's nice to be able to go onto the forum and ask peers about it," says Jay Bearfield, president of Liquid Landscape Designs in Carlisle, Mass. "So, if I see a product that looks good, I'll throw it out there and get a feel for what other people are using."

Snow Jobs

Not every pond owner wants to buy 15 different items and reach into freezing water, which presents opportunity for businesses who offer full-service maintenance.

"It's a missed opportunity, period," Bearfield says. "A lot of guys just aren't doing maintenance. They're coming in, they're installing and they're leaving it up to the pond keeper to deal with."

In the case of Masterson's, the demand and profit in this area were significant enough to spur the growth of a second company.

"Up until last year we opened and closed ponds for around 50 people," Masterson says. "My brother, Brian Masterson, just broke away from us and opened up his own company and [now] we refer our whole maintenance route to him."

Begin holiday displays with Jack-o-lanterns for Halloween. *Courtesy of Pond Headquarters*
lifestyle.

"From the retail side, the whole idea of Halloween and Christmas is exploding," Bearfield says. "It's getting bigger and bigger. A lot more people are starting to buy [seasonal] decorations for their ponds. People are hosting more parties."

Kent, who also owns Instalyte Inc., sells Christmas tress in front of her store as a hook to lure customers to her holiday-decorated display ponds, which feature her own line of battery-powered, submersible lights.

"Then people come to our business and see our Instalyte products decorating the pond," she says. "We may even sell them a pond, because they see the atmosphere."

Holiday décor items appeal to the consumer because they create the feeling of year-round use of the water garden. Another way to do that, and keep sales moving, is to simply encourage your customers to keep ponds running all year.

"I'd say close to 75 percent of my customers keep them going, and that's something we try to encourage," Bearfield says. "We site most of our ponds with the idea of the winter

Winterization Fundamentals

Many retailers offer full checklists for clients, along with educational seminars, that detail all the products they need to be successful at winterization. It can be used just like a shopping list at the conclusion of the seminar, says Mike (Mick) Masterson co-owner of Masterson's Aquatic Nursery and Garden Center in East Aurora, N.Y.

His List:

- Pond Netting
- Long-Handled Net
- Shoulder-Length Aquatic Gloves
- Tall Boots
- Hip Waders
- Cold-Water Fish Food
- Stress Coat
- Sludge-Digesting Bacteria
- pH, Ammonia and Nitrite Test Kits
- Salt
- A Deicer or Aerator



season as well, so that way they are visible from a window or they are visible from a dining area."

Pond professionals can build fall business by teaching customers how to float pumpkins and apples in their water features.

Courtesy of Jungle Labs

The long-term benefits of marketing the hobby as a year-round pastime outweigh the dangers of ice damage, Bearfield says.

"From a marketing standpoint it's great," he says. "My whole argument is that nature doesn't shut down, so why should they shut down? From that aspect it has really allowed us to tap into marketing our ponds as a four-season hobby."

Pictures really are worth a thousand words, he says.

"All you need is one great picture of an ice formation on a waterfall lit up at night and that's all it really takes," Bearfield says.

Kevin Soergel, president of Soergel and Associates in Gibsonia, Pa., also works with clients to extend the pond season by building outdoor fireplaces and fire pits.

Many contractors encourage customers to keep their ponds running during the winter months.

Courtesy of Your Escapes

"It gets [people] out earlier in the spring and later in the fall," Soergel says. "Even if they only look out the window at it, it's still something they can enjoy all year."

During a particularly cold stretch, Soergel says there are a few fail-safe measures and precautions to suggest to customers. During a cold snap that causes excessive ice formation, it's as simple as shutting down the system, installing a heater and waiting until spring to check the status of the equipment.

Other considerations for year-round pond operation include evaporation, something that may not cross the consumer's mind.

"You do need to maintain adequate water in the pond, because of ice evaporation," Soergel says. "Since you may not be able to run your auto-fill valve in the winter, you may need to bring out the hose a couple times. I have seen ponds where the water level has gone way below the ice level."

Regardless of the approach used with hobbyists, it is important to have a backup during this unpredictable season

"I'm pushy with my clients to always have a plan, in case something fails," Bearfield says. "Anything can happen. Chances are any pump can make it just fine pushing water, because running water is going to prevent freezing. Just in case, I insist on a backup plan, weather it's pre-sunk aeration or some sort of heater."

Tom Barthel, former managing editor of Water Garden News, is co-author of Garden Ponds (Bowtie Press). Bowtie Inc. owns both Water Garden News and Bowtie Press.

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