



trends

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# Fit for a SHOW

Home and garden  
shows require  
thoughtful  
planning

Every season brings with it not only varying temperatures and different shades of greenery, but also new opportunities for landscapers and their potential customers to attend what is simply known in the industry as a "home show." These shows, which occur annually throughout the country, feature landscaping companies, lighting specialists, information about remodeling, building supplies, tips for decorating and more – a virtual oasis for home and garden enthusiasts and landscapers alike.

Attending a home show is a weighty business decision for landscapers – one that can prove to be beneficial to your bottom line, and one that at other times may cause an investment in funds that could have been spent elsewhere. When determining whether it is the right choice for your company, there are several aspects to take into consideration.

### Preparing a plan

Taking the time to map out your objectives a few months before attending a home show is a crucial step for landscapers. Bill Lillie, owner of Sprigs and Twigs Landscapes in Gales Ferry, Connecticut, says developing concise show objectives is perhaps the single most important step in preparing for a show. Lillie and his employees do this by creating and refining the key ideas and concepts they want to get across to customers at the show.

"For us, it has been to incorporate the phrase 'Now is the Time to Have the Garden You've Always Wanted' in our backdrop and literature handouts," says Lillie. With this phrase, Sprigs and Twigs hopes to motivate customers to take action by conveying that their dreams are within reach.

In this same regard, you and your employees will be more likely to build up a rapport with customers

at the show by focusing on what your company has to offer in terms of specific services. If your company specializes in certain services, such as irrigation, make sure to say so to prospective clients.

Another objective that Lillie lists is to build the company's mailing list. The key here is to obtain quality names – not just those of "hot customers," says Nate Wagher, owner of Nature Care Landscape Engineering based in Belton, North Carolina.

"We took 75 to 100 names and phone numbers down, and what we've found is that people who were hot to do something at the show had changed their minds when we called back later," says Wagher. Most of Nature Care's business, he says, does not come from customers who attend home shows, but instead from people who track the company down on the Internet. For this reason, in addition to the high costs of having a display, he does not think exhibiting at a home show has been beneficial to his business.

### Consider the cost

Wagher says he spent close to \$15,000 for Nature Care's display, which was about 15-by-15 feet. Since many contractors and landscaping businesses attend the Greenville Home Show, Wagher felt it was hard to differentiate much in terms of services; so attracting customers depended a lot on the display. He and his employees labored over theirs for about a week, using forklifts to get all the materials in the building.

"We had a water pond, some lighting and turf and plant material," Wagher says. "While the experience was fun, we attended the show two years in a row and only got two jobs off of it." He believes this was because many of the customers seemed to be price shopping and didn't actually realize how expensive landscaping can be.

Lillie, on the other hand, has had a much different experience. His expenditures typically range from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per show, with only two or three other landscapers at the most recent Builders Association of Eastern Connecticut, Mohegan Sun Home Show. Since the Mohegan Sun is a casino, Lillie believes this attracts more high-end customers.

As much as 30 percent of Sprigs and Twigs' business each year comes from new customers that saw the company at a home show. "Your success may depend entirely on where you're set up and who you attract," Lillie says. His advice to other contractors is to check out the show in advance to get a feel for the customer base and your expenditures.

### Network, network, network

While contractors have mixed views, one thing is certain: Attending a home show can be a very valuable networking tool. Both Lillie and Wagher say that meeting other contractors has helped them in the long run.

"There is a wide spectrum in what all landscapers do," Lillie says. "We want to offer as many services as we can to our customers, so if we aren't able to do it ourselves we will find someone who can and work with them."

Even if you don't seem to be connecting with the customers, talk to the other contractors and get to know them. You may be able to contract work out and end up with a good flow of business after all.

There are always going to be at least a few other landscaping companies at a home show. But, as Lillie says, this can work to your advantage if you have a stronger booth and stronger staff than your competitors. "Customers comparison shop and having a well-designed display, powerful message and a well-prepared staff makes a big difference." **TLC**