

INNOVATION

with a

smile

By enjoying *people* as much as *plants*, Van Belle Nursery has created a company culture focused on working hard to play hard.

BY JASMINA DOLCE

What began as a landscape construction company in 1973 has since bloomed into 80 acres of growing space known as Van Belle Nursery. Founders Bill and Grace Van Belle have since passed the business down to their son, Dave Van Belle, although they are very much still involved in the business, which is based in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada.

Van Belle Nursery is not your typical family business. As a matter of fact, Dave Van Belle says he was initially not interested in joining the business and there was never any pressure to join. However, his desire to want to run a company and be a leader is what brought him back to the business.

"I want to lead, and I want to build something," he shares. "I love to be able to do my best and build an organization with great people."

Dave started out in sales at Van Belle Nursery, eventually becoming sales manager and then general manager. Today, he is president of the company. Although he embraces the responsibility of leading Van Belle Nursery into the future, he is grateful for the ongoing support of his parents.

"My dad has provided me with a lot of mentoring," says Van Belle, "and his outlook and philosophy have really influenced me. He is around as often as I need him, and his best role at our company now is to act as a sounding board for many of us as well as an encourager to all."

VAN BELLE NURSERY AT A GLANCE

LOCATION:

Pacific Northwest - Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada

ESTABLISHED: 1973

FOUNDERS: Bill and Grace Van Belle

PRESIDENT: Dave Van Belle

GROWING AREA: 80 acres

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:

50 year round, 100 during peak season



Employees work on a team-building exercise, learning Van Belle Nursery's core values.

GROWING IN CANADA

Being located in Canada, Van Belle Nursery serves customers all throughout North America. The company has two divisions: young plants and retail ready.

“Our young plant sales are evenly divided between growers in the United States and Canada,” says DeVonne Friesen, vice president of business development, “but 95 percent of our finished plants are sold in Canada, with a high majority of them going into the Canadian prairies.”

On the young plants side, Van Belle Nursery focuses on supplying growers with hardy, ornamental shrubs. “We grow tried and true varieties but are known for offering the latest genetics from the top branded programs, like Proven Winners and First Editions,” shares Friesen. “We are also known for offering a liner that turns quickly for growers.”

On the finished, retail ready side of the business, the focus is on hardy, ornamental shrubs in larger “yard ready” sizes ranging from 2 gallons up to 15 gallons. “Another significant part of this division is our jumbo perennial lineup, which again focuses on flowering, hardy varieties in sizes ranging from 2 to 5 gallons,” says Friesen. “We also offer fruit and vegetable programs, and specialty annual programs designed for instant color and patio décor.”

“We do a good bit of laughing everyday, and I think that's part of what attracts people to work here.”

— DAVE VAN BELLE

Van Belle adds, “Our aim is to deliver best plants, best service and best shipping experience. To do that consistently is difficult, and we put a lot of resources into trying to make that happen.”

SPEAKING OF RESOURCES...

Van Belle Nursery's greatest resource is the people who make it all happen. According to Van Belle, the company culture has become more and more of a focus for his business. “It is so critical to have the right company culture, the right people and the right team that knows what they're doing,” he says. “And they have to all be aligned in the same direction.”

The company works with a business coach to help put the entire business on a one-page business plan. “At every quarterly meeting, we review the plan. We share it with everybody,” says Van Belle.

To achieve this organizational alignment, all



Lean flow-inspired packing line for young plants



Container shipping system at Van Belle Nursery's Hallert location



An employee uses the mobile version of the company's custom software in the field to check inventory.

“Social media give us a good avenue to have some fun with our customers by showing the lighter side of what we do.” — **DAVE VAN BELLE**

employees take part in daily huddles. “We feel we can really communicate up and down the company quickly,” he says. “We also have monthly staff meetings, where we show all of our sales numbers and what’s happening in different departments. It’s basically a monthly pep rally, and we want everyone to feel included.”

“We also have a lot of fun. If you have fun and people are laughing, then we’re going to have way better workforce morale and productivity,” he adds. “We spend a lot of time at work, and we try to have lots of fun here. We don’t take ourselves too seriously. We do a good bit of laughing everyday, and I think that’s part of what attracts people to work here.”

TAPPING INTO TECHNOLOGY

Van Belle’s fun company culture can easily be found within the company’s online presence. Over the past few years, Van Belle has increased their focus on using social media to connect with customers.

“Social media gives us a good avenue to have some fun with our customers by showing the lighter side of what we do,” says Van Belle. “It seems that when we are more open with who we are, it builds trust and ultimately strengthens our overall relationship with them.”

“Having an interactive conversation with customers following us on Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest allows us to communicate more of our personality to our partners,” says Friesen. “We post updates on news and various announcements, but some of the greatest responses we get are from funny pictures or videos we’ve posted.”

“This industry requires a lot of hard work and long days, so it’s refreshing to people when they see our willingness to laugh at ourselves — it always seems to generate more energy for them and for us!”

According to Dave, information technology is allowing Van Belle Nursery to drive forward. For example, the company has three programmers on staff that are responsible for improving business processes.

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**DEVELOPING A BRAND:
Bloomin' Easy**

Van Belle Nursery recently announced the introduction of its very own brand, Bloomin' Easy. "We're big believers in brands and what they can do to communicate confidence to the end consumer," shares Dave Van Belle.

According to DeVonne Friesen their aim is to use consumer research to create a brand that's built around the consumer first.

"We want to support the consumer by showing them simple steps to be successful with their Bloomin' Easy plants — how to plant, water, prune, fertilize and overwinter plants," says Friesen. "If we can take care of these questions for consumers, then gardening won't feel like this huge ordeal, which is the main reason that this next generation isn't getting into gardening.

"Two percent of consumers are master gardeners," he says. "Seven percent would call themselves garden enthusiasts. The rest fall into what we would call casual gardeners or reluctant gardeners, and that's where most of the purchasing power is. There's been a lack of focus in our industry on becoming relevant to this group, and the need is definitely there."

Van Belle Nursery has created a robust website for Bloomin' Easy with a database built into the backend, which will ultimately allow users to look up plant material based on specific geographic areas.

"Consumers can purchase a plant in the

garden center and log onto our website, which is mobile enabled," says Friesen. "The idea is to keep it simple for them by showing them plants that work best for their area, and to use language that makes sense regardless of what they know about gardening."

After-purchase support is also a huge part of Bloomin' Easy. Consumers can sign up to receive regular updates on the plants they've purchased, which will include instructional tips and video links.

While the information and support are designed to make the consumer experience great and enjoyable, equally important to Bloomin' Easy are the improved varieties that are designed to fit with the lifestyle of today's garden center consumer.

"When we make decisions about which plants are candidates for being included in the Bloomin' Easy brand, we always ask how an improvement makes life better for the person buying the plant," says Friesen, vice president of business development. "Whether the benefit is that a plant is more disease resistant or needs less pruning, it has to mean something to consumers.

"Our goal is to do the work for them and offer trusted, product-specific information both at the time of purchase and planting, and later for ongoing success," he adds.

Bloomin' Easy, still in its infancy, is currently available solely through Van Belle Nursery for the 2013 season.

DID YOU KNOW?

DAVE VAN BELLE, president, and **DEVONNE FRIESEN**, vice president of business development, are both members of GPN's inaugural 40 Under 40.

Over the past few years, these programmers have written the company's software, allowing Van Belle to take control of all facets of production.

"It's worked very well," shares Van Belle. "I don't think we'd be where we are today if we didn't have our IT department."

Van Belle's in-house software system is used for production, accounts receivable, purchase orders, human resources and shipping. An added benefit is that the information is all accessible through their mobile devices.

Van Belle says, "All the managers have iPods or iPhones so they can adjust counts and inventory right from the greenhouse."

EFFICIENCY IS KEY

Van Belle Nursery's in-house software goes hand in hand with the company's focus on lean processes. For the past several years, Van Belle has implemented lean into the company.

"We have had excellent success using Flowvision.com to implement improvements in our propagation, shipping and our tag room," shares Van Belle. "For example we print the majority of our tags in house, just in time. Our tags are printed an hour or two before they are applied to the plants. This allows us maximum flexibility in shipping, and also means we have no tag inventory, except for branded tags."

This spring Van Belle is focusing on improving container shipping through lean processes, aiming for 25 percent productivity improvement.

"We have really tried to absorb all the lessons from lean that we can, and then apply them elsewhere as we are able," says Van Belle. "Our setbacks usually stem from a lack of self discipline to stay the course and keep on track. That starts directly at the top and is where I need to be a continuous example and proponent." ■

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