



Above: Wireless handhelds allow employees to prescan items for quick checkout and maintain inventory.

Below: Belt printers have recently been added to the high-tech mix.

Bottom: Employees can ring up sales and print receipts from anywhere within the 25-acre operation.



lessons learned

Driving Innovation

When Troy's Landscape Supply decided to test drive a POS system and wireless handhelds, they ended up doubling their business and earning a reputation as cutting-edge retailers.

By Darhiana Mateo

Soon after Troy's Landscape Supply expanded from a 5-acre nursery to a 25-acre operation in late 2001, owner Troy Miller realized that along with the new location, they needed a new business strategy. With its sudden and dramatic growth, the Cohoes, N.Y.-based landscape distribution and wholesale nursery business had difficulty moving product and customers through fast enough. "Everybody's in a hurry today," Miller says. "When you've got an influx of people, and you open doors at 9 a.m. and see 50 cars in the parking lot, and you only have five employees selling, you have to move as aggressively as you can."

At the time, they were still running regular cash registers. When "lines started stretching out to the parking lot" while cashiers struggled to differentiate between a 4-inch geranium and another potted plant as they rung up sales, Miller went looking for a solution.

Going Wireless

For Troy's Landscape Supply, the answer required that Miller step into the unfamiliar world of technology. These days, the business is well known for its efficiency and cutting-edge point-of-sale (POS) system, complete with wireless handheld devices and belt printers. Customers specifically choose to shop at Troy's for that shrub, paver or orchid they've been eyeing because they know they will be in and out in no time.

The system that Miller used to improve his business was created by Small Business Innovations (SBI) Nursery Software, based in Portland, Ore., which provides

software solutions and 24-hour customer support for wholesale growers, garden center retailers and landscape distribution centers. With 18 "totally wireless" handhelds running at any one time, employees at Troy's Landscape Supply can quickly prescan items and ring up sales by swiping a credit card right on the handheld from anywhere in the nursery. Some can even print receipts directly from a belt printer. Translation: No more frustrating long lines. Hello, speedy checkouts.

Virtual Upgrade

The handhelds allow employees to prescan items for quick checkout while improving customer service. The wireless unit makes it easy to maintain inventory, allowing them to "virtually" walk through the facility and conduct cycle counts. It also significantly improves the sales throughput, enabling businesses to sell much more per hour — without having to add more sales staff.

Over time, Troy worked closely with SBI to tweak the software to meet the business' evolving needs. Originally, employees could only use the handhelds to prescan customers' items as they shopped, making the checkout experience at the cashiers inside that much smoother. Recently, they've added two belt printers to the high-tech mix, allowing employees to scan items, ring up sales and print receipts from anywhere within the 25-acre operation.

"Not everybody needs to be in my building," says Miller. Gone are the days when "the poor lady that only wants to get her mom a hanging basket and get on her way is stuck behind Joe in line...waiting and waiting and waiting," he says. "As a retailer, I don't want you standing in that line waiting behind

lessons learned



Since going live with the point of sales system in 2002, Troy's is able to move 40 percent more customers on any given day. (Photo: SBI Nursery Software)

Joe. I want to get you home so you can go about your day."

Moving Traffic

And the response from customers has been phenomenal, he adds. "People really like that," Miller says. "That has put us above and beyond the box stores. It's really put us on top around here; we're seen as one of the most innovative [companies]."

In fact, since implementing the POS system in 2002, the business is able to move 40 percent more customers in and out every day, and they didn't need to add a single staff person. "We're able to move almost twice as many people in the same time. Mother's Day — you

"We're able to move almost twice as many people in the same time. Mother's Day — you should watch this thing run."

— Troy Miller,
Troy's Landscape Supply

should watch this thing run. It's very impressive how fast you can move a customer around and finish that transaction," says Miller.

And the speed doesn't compromise the quality of their customer service, he adds. "They love it. We get so many compliments. We want to give everyone a personalized sales experience, but we want to be

able to move them as fast as possible too."

Industry Specific

The ability to conduct wireless sales, move traffic quickly and improve customer service are key for most retail operations, especially in an industry whose peak times (holidays and the spring season) must turn a profit to stay afloat for the remainder of the year. The fact that the handhelds are industry specific is yet another perk. "We integrate with other software that gives us all the botanical names and common names [of plants], for example," says Lisa Hattery, marketing manager at SBI. "That's what sets us apart. There's a lot of point-of-sale software out there. We are industry specific."

In fact, Aaron Allison, one of the owners of SBI, operated a nursery for several years before starting the software company. Offering growers, retailers and landscapers a "huge plant library" they can plug into eliminates hours of inputting botanical information necessary to identify product. The company worked very hard, and continues to evolve its technology, so that it really speaks to this industry, says Allison.

"Lots of software companies look at our industry and say, 'Oh, they're farmers; how hard can it be?'" he says. "They jump in and, two years later, jump back out thinking, 'That was more complex than I thought.' The inventory is a lot harder to deal with than people realize."

For Miller, SBI's industry-specific software was a big selling point. "That was one of the real breaking points when I found SBI," he says. "This is set up for our industry. It's not something that works at the Burger

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Lessons Learned

King or tire warehouse; it works for me. I decided that, realistically, this was the system we needed."

A Success Story

SBI counts Troy's Landscape Supply, one of their first customers to implement wireless sales on the

handhelds, as one of their greatest success stories — as well as a key partner. "[Miller] really drove the innovation that we made to the software," Hattery adds. "We had the basics of it there, but we tweaked it, made it so that it fit the business."

SBI currently serves about 155

customers in the retail sector, about 50 of them using the wireless sales application.

"Worth Every Penny"

Troy's venture into high-tech retail did not come cheap, says Miller. The whole system ended up

costing more than \$50,000 (handhelds cost about \$2,000 each). But it was worth every penny, he says, "when you've got Mother's Day in your face, your parking lot is full, people are coming down the hill, parking up the street. When you can move as fast as we do, there's no dollar amount you can put on top of that."

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The industry, traditionally not on the cutting edge of technology, is slowly starting to come around, Allison says. People in the past have been burned by software companies that did not understand the industry's intricacies and needs. "That's the truth. They didn't get what was promised, so people are very fearful. And they have a right to be." But sometimes, as in Troy's case, taking chances pays off. "It really works," Allison says. "The return on investment is huge."

Businesses from as far as Michigan and North Carolina fly to upstate New York to see the now well-honed system in action at Troy's. "It's slick," Miller says. "I tell them it's like taking a car for a test drive. Until you get a feel for it and see how smooth it drives, you can't imagine how it can change your business." **GPN**

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