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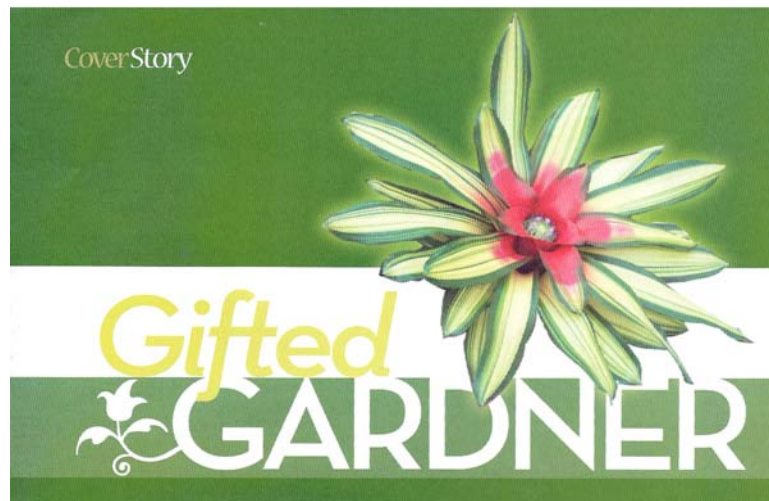
**PROFESSIONAL
OF THE YEAR**

MATTHEW GARDNER, THE WRIGHT GARDNER

**BEST PRACTICES:
MANAGER & TECHNICIAN OF THE YEAR**

TPIE SHOW COVERAGE

FLORIDA FOLIAGE MARKET REPORT



Bringing Magic Indoors

By Ali Cybulski

Green runs through Matthew Gardner's blood. His ancestors, who owned some of the land where Oxford University now sits, were farmers and gardeners, and his family name is rooted in gardening.

Even so, Gardner veered from family tradition and began his professional career as a pre-school teacher. In hindsight, it turned out to be a job that laid a solid foundation for his transition to entrepreneur. Gardner, now owner of The Wright Gardner, San Francisco, Calif., cultivated patience, persistence and a positive disposition — all traits of an effective manager.

"My job is coaching and encouraging our staff," says Gardner, noting that he passes on customer compliments in staff meetings and shares positive feedback in handwritten notes and via the company's quarterly newsletter.

Gardner describes his overall approach as management by wandering.

"I will ride along with technicians on their routes," Gardner says. "I will go to the flower mart at 4 a.m. with my floral designers. I have close contact with our salesperson to help with design decisions.

"Yet, our people are empowered and I know when to step back," he adds. "There are some things that other people do better, and you just have to accept that. I'm more of a generalist."

Gardner also is determined — this drive has seen him through some tough times. He is a cancer survivor. He launched his business the week the stock market crashed in 1987. Most recently, he coped with the fallout after Silicon Valley's dot-com bust.

He has dealt with each business challenge using the same formula for success: Provide creative solutions for customers and operate like a big company, even if you're a small one. Gardner, *Interior Business magazine's 2004 Professional of the Year*, sets himself apart with this approach.

Quick Tip

A good way to keep in touch with customers and heighten awareness of different services is through a company newsletter. Matthew Gardner, president, The Wright Gardner, San Francisco, Calif., mails his newsletter quarterly. Besides information on available services, the newsletter recognizes clients and employees and includes educational items about interior foliage.



BIG BUSINESS.

Gardner says his success has stemmed from a "think big" mindset, which he has had from the start. "I focused on the business as if it was a big business, and I put systems in place for quality assurance, billing and inventory," says Gardner, noting that such business systems help an owner / operator stay organized during the tough early years. "Like a lot of us, we were undercapitalized at first. I wore a lot of hats — I was the salesperson, the installer, the maintenance person and the administrative person for two years."

Luckily, systems minimize chaos. Gardner began by setting up a system to keep accurate records. Using Excel, he created a simple spreadsheet to track installations, replacements, feeding schedules and color rotations for each client. He still relies on this spreadsheet system to record horticultural maintenance details for the company's accounts.

Gardner also uses a similar spreadsheet system for tracking inventory. Whether working on a takeover, a new installation or lease, technicians take a detailed inventory of plants and containers on their accounts. They must make any changes on a hard copy of the inventory they carry in a binder and report them back to the office as they occur.

"Whether something is added or taken away, we have to keep up with it," Gardner says. "It takes real teamwork between the office staff and frontline technicians. The technicians are in charge of making sure their inventories are updated, and they take ownership of this."

Next, Gardner focused on establishing a quality assurance system. He looked to outside resources to build his own, pulling information from industry trade magazines and peers who were willing to share their systems. "I took the things I liked the most (from each source) and combined them to create my system," Gardner says.

A solid system, he adds, must be based on customer needs and expectations. "You have to ask how often they want to hear from you," he says. "With some of our larger clients, we make direct phone calls to them, while others might prefer e-mails. It is up to you find out their needs and expectations and be proactive."

Finally, for billing, Gardner decided to use QuickBooks accounting software. Instead of invoicing all clients during the same time every month, he divided clients into two groups - each of which is billed at two separate times. "We have found that this is best for cash flow," Gardner says.

Systems such as this one have had to pass muster with Gardner's business coach, Larry Bangs, of Boulder, Colo. Gardner has worked with Bangs for 12 years, consulting with him on financials, profit, taxes, insurance, systems and inventory. "He helps facilitate a weekly conference call with our salesperson," Gardner says. "He makes sure that we are being true to our systems, that we have systems that support our business and that we rely on them."

The Wright Gardner strives to present creative design solutions with multiple service options for clients.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS.

Besides formalized systems, a company must offer creative solutions to project a "big" image and ensure steady growth. One business solution Gardner embraced from the outset was subirrigation.



photo: The Wright Gardner

Subirrigation technology, which allows plants to drink water from a reservoir only when they are thirsty, lengthens the time required between service visits and reduces replacements due to overwatering. It allows interiorscapers to take on more jobs with the same amount of labor, increasing efficiency and profitability. "Subirrigation is helpful for plant life and it is a smart business practice," Gardner says. "It has allowed us to go to a 10-day service cycle. We've found that most clients really can do with fewer service visits. I've always found that we're in the business of getting results, and that is what matters."

The system isn't foolproof, though, and sometimes the 10-day schedule must be altered based on plant or client needs. But Gardner says most clients are willing to work through glitches, as they are better educated and more aware of subirrigation, thanks to industry education.

In addition to providing the latest technology, Gardner pushes himself to produce creative design solutions. This creativity is what allowed him to grow his business after the stock market crash in 1987. "Discretionary spending was down, but people were looking for good ways to keep their plant service," he says. "I quickly learned how to be creative in getting new jobs and assisting clients in how to (keep their plants)."

Try offering a proposal that includes several different price points, Gardner says. For instance, he produces "gourmet" and "low-fat" versions of every proposal. If cost is a concern, he might include lower price points on a container or reduce the size or number of plants.

Gardner will not, however, simply drop his hourly fee or plant costs to keep a customer. Instead, he takes care to present a design that impresses - even if that means working on a smaller scale.

"Look at the areas that make the most impression," Gardner says.

"If it's an office, for example, it might be the reception desk. Many times, less is more, and with the great palette of containers available now and specimen plants, this look really works. I'd rather see one great plant in a wonderful pot than a design of Warneckii in baskets. There are people who like that and we've sold that design look, but there is so much more we can do."

Gardner, for example, offers a service menu that includes high end floral design and real-estate staging. Floral design has been particularly lucrative. In fact, 40 percent of Gardner's foliage clients also are floral clients. "We developed a system of how to do floral well, and it used to be just me doing it, but now we have a designer," he says.

His system is a simple one. Purchasing is done once a week at the San Francisco Flower Mart — only four blocks from Gardner's office. Deliveries are scheduled at hospitality accounts on Friday and corporate accounts on Monday, and a runner checks the arrangements once a week to see if blooms or water need refreshing.

Designs, however, are not so simple. His look: cutting edge. "We look for interesting vessels, not the standard run-of-the-mill vases," Gardner says. "We don't do an FTD look. It's pretty high-end and sculptural. We source interesting flowers, like protea, and moss covered branches."

Gardner is careful, though, that his designs suit the client. "You have to get to know the client and what their needs are," he says. "We sit down with them and have an interview about what their expectations are, what colors and flowers they don't like and the things they do like. We work with that, although (floral) can still be subjective.

"If the client doesn't like it, we'll bring them something else, and we usually eat that charge," Gardner adds. "But we are pretty proactive in getting the right thing to them initially."

In addition to floral, Gardner has dug up a thriving market in real estate staging. Gardner rents plants and sells maintenance services to realtors who are selling high-end homes.

"We have a real niche with real-estate staging," he says. "We just did the staging for a \$7 million home. We work with realtors and the stagers and designers who specialize in this work. If the house sells in 24 hours: Great. If it's a year, that's great, because we'll charge fees for maintenance. And sometimes, when they buy the house, they'll buy the plants, too."

MANAGING PEOPLE.

Appealing service options like staging aid growth, and so does top-notch customer service. Selecting the right employees is vital to service delivery, Gardner says.

He admits this is an area he fumbled with early in his career. "We made a couple of horrible mistakes in hiring just to fill a gap quickly," Gardner says. "From that, we learned to thoroughly check references and listen closely to the person in the interviews. I look for people who have good people skills and the love of horticulture - they have to get the people-plant connection. I might listen to their reaction to a new variety of plant. Are they excited as opposed to being burdened by what a job it will be to care for the plant?"

In addition to thorough interviewing, Gardner uses a trial employment period. "We have one day where we'll hire them and pay them to ride along, even if they've worked in the industry before," he says, noting that either he or the employee may opt out after the trial day.

If Gardner suspects the person might be a good match, he'll bring him on for a 3D-day trial. "We have been using this system for the last four years, and it has helped our hiring to a degree," Gardner says. "I think it's something we'll probably always be challenged with but on the other hand, we have technicians who have been with us for 10 years. We don't tend to have a huge turnover in our company."

Gardner attributes this to several factors: above-average pay, fully paid benefits, 401K and a bonus program. "There also is an attitude of fun and camaraderie, even though we're very hard-working," he says.

Employees also appreciate Gardner's effort to get everyone involved in education. In meetings, horticultural and office staff members take turns presenting plant or procedure profiles. Everyone picks a plant or a procedure, such as pruning, and shares his knowledge about the topic. "We have the plant in the meeting and the person who's in charge leads a discussion about it," Gardner says. "This informal discussion is empowering."

At the same time, Gardner acknowledges that people want, crave and need direction. If someone is timid about making small decisions, for example, he makes an extra effort to be encouraging. "They need to know that our results — happy clients and happy plants — comes in ownership of their accounts," Gardner says. "If there is a decision to be made that they as the frontline technician view as being the best for everyone, they are really encouraged to make that decision."

Technicians learn the appropriate courses of action through biweekly training meetings that include plant and procedure profiles. Gardner and his staff members also attend "Tech Talks" presented by the Plantscape Industry Alliance. These seminars take place several times a year and touch on topics like subirrigation and other maintenance issues. "I was one of the people who developed this program with the idea of getting people in the industry to teach, share and pass on knowledge," he says.

Gardner makes a regular practice of this himself. Carol Peterson Webber, who nominated him for the Interior Business Professional of the Year Award, says: "Matthew has been volunteering his time and efforts to promote professionalism for as long as I have known him — 15 years. He has never faltered to step forward when something needed to be done in our industry. He has been on committee after committee.

"Matthew also mentored me in my early years as a business owner," continues the president of Plant Parenthood, Burlingame, Calif. "He gave us work to do as a subcontractor, he guided me to vendors, and he helped me with my first big contract bid. He did all of this for someone who he could consider competition in his work area."

Clearly, Gardner enjoys giving back to his peers, though his long term goals center on his employees. "My goal is to provide them a lot of stability and continue to provide good compensation," he says, noting that learning is a long-term goal, too. "I have never been afraid to ask questions," he adds. "There are so many smart, wise people out there, and I have been fortunate to know a lot of them. I have never been made to feel that something wasn't valid, and conversely, I have paid this back to new businesses and helped mentor other people along. If we continue to do that as an industry, it will make us all better."

High-end floral design is a specialty of Gardner's. He sources distinctive vases and cut flowers.



We don't tend to have a huge turnover in our company. There's an attitude of fun and camaraderie, even though we're hard-working. - Matthew Gardner

Professional of the Year: **VITAL STATS**

Matthew Gardner, The Wright Gardner

Headquarters: San Francisco, Calif.

Customer mix: 80 percent commercial, 15 percent residential and 5 percent "other," which includes museums and cultural centers

Service mix: 75 percent maintenance, 10 percent design/build and 15 percent holiday/corporate floral

Employees: Nine full-time, two part-time

2004 revenue: \$900,000

2003 revenue: \$850,000

Projected 2005 revenue: \$1 million

Nominated by: Carol Peterson-Webber, president, Plant Parenthood, Burlingame, Calif.

Years in industry: 18

Education: Bachelor's degrees in early childhood education from Portland State University, Portland, Ore., and in business from Golden Gate University, San Francisco, Calif.

Industry activities:

- CIPA (PIA) chair, 1997 to 2001
- Active CIPA past chair
- CIPA awards program chair
- Member of ALCA, IFMA, BOMA and San Francisco Chamber of Commerce
- "CIPA Cares" volunteer
- Plants at Work investor

Other activities:

- Volunteers time and plants to the Burt's Children's Center, San Francisco Public Schools and Frameline Film Festival
- Sits on board of directors for community children's programs
- Company a participant in welfare-to-work and programs for those with HIV to return to the workforce