

## Internet and Then Some

Many nurseries are introducing technology into their operations, but few are doing it like Wilson Nurseries, Inc. in Hampshire, IL. Wilson uses wireless hand-held devices for inventory, an online catalog for product pricing and availability, flat-screen televisions for personalized customer presentations in showrooms, and computer-aided design programs to let customers “see” a landscaping project before it gets started.

The innovations are going to save the company 20 percent on its labor costs, according to President Roger Fick. But that wasn't the reason he wanted to get the system up and running. “It was the practical thing to do in order to coordinate the operations of 1,000 acres with employees,” he said.

Fick is no stranger to technology. He helped create the company's first computer-based inventory program in 1984. Back then, it cost the company \$250,000 for a system where employees had to write inventory numbers on cards and enter the data into the computer manually. Even with the technology, it could take two months to count the inventory.

Now, the company uses wireless hand-devices to scan a bar code on products when they come off the delivery trucks, similar to the system used in grocery stores. In less than a second, the information goes into an inventory system and online catalog.

Andy Fick, vice president of Wilson Nurseries, said the system keeps a more accurate count than hand counting and saves them the embarrassment of having two salespeople selling the same item. “The fewer times you have to tell a customer ‘sorry,’ the more times they are going to rely on you,” he says.

Once it is in the catalog, the customers take over. Like North Branch and Arbor Valley, customers enter the website and then use their password to access the catalog, which has everything from a plant's budding time to pictures of the fall color for certain trees. Using the catalog,

customers figure out what they want and when it arrives.

Wendy McMurray, marketing director for Wilson Nurseries, says the company had one main goal for the catalog. “The idea was to have everything in one place. This way, people can see a list of products and separate what they want from what they don't want.”

Even if customers don't go online, salespeople can access the inventory system on the spot to tell customers whether a product is available. The web catalog took about four months and cost \$25,000, but it has helped give Wilson 200 new customers this year alone. Andy said the new catalog saves time for Wilson and its customers. “With our prices in the (catalog), it saves us writing quotes for customers. A customer can figure out what they need, calculate their volume discount, and get their price during one sit-down session.”

For customers who prefer to go to a showroom for their products, the company is installing as many as four flat-screen televisions to act as product introduction centers. First, a showroom customer requests a visual presentation on a certain plant or tree. Then the company representative finds the information in the computer banks, creates a presentation, and puts it on the screen for the customer's viewing pleasure.

Jennifer Fick, another vice president of Wilson Nurseries, said the presentations are part of Wilson's overall commitment to educating customers. “We see a need for people to have more information. There are so many types of plants that it can be rather daunting.”

Some customers are more interested in projects than products. That is why Wilson's website allows landscaping customers to send the dimensions of a project to their computer designer and get a potential landscaping plan within 48 hours.



*Rather than printing a paper catalog twice a year, Wilson created a resource—booklet and disc—for people to use as a tool to plan and construct projects, both in the office and on the road. Wilson included a full-color reference catalog of the company's plants and hardgoods, along with information on plant characteristics; a quick calculations reference (imperial to metric; flagstone, brick, groundcovers, etc.), and information on Wilson Nurseries & Landscape Supply. A current price list still goes out to customers, as well as being available online.*

Wilson Nurseries wants to add another feature to the hand-held inventory devices that would allow them to measure a plant's height and width with lasers. Also, the company wants to add online ordering to its web catalog and create a system where salespeople can use the hand-held devices to enter orders when they are visiting customers.

Roger said the new technology has paid off already in lower expenses and quicker sales time for current, and possibly future, products. “Customers want to know what we are going to have next year,” he says. “We can get an idea, because we know how a product is selling instantly. It allows us to get a handle on [future sales] almost effortlessly.”

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