

A TEAM EFFORT

HOW PRIDES CORNER FARMS FOCUSES ON PEOPLE TO SUCCEED

By Laura Allen

How does a company that has 275 acres of production area, offers a diverse product line, and serves more than 1,800 customers keep everything running smoothly? The answer is to divide and conquer. That's the system Prides Corner Farms started using about seven years ago and has seen great success with.

"We've divided the nursery into 17 distinct nurseries," says Mark Sellew, president and owner of Prides Corner Farms. "We have a management team within each of those 17 distinct crop groups, centered around specific plants, and they, in that capacity, are able to get ownership of the plants they grow and do the fine work that makes the difference between growing a great plant and an average plant."

In each crop group there is a team leader, and three to four assistant team leaders. Then each team has a labor force of up to 10 people, depending on the type of workload at a certain time of the year. He has seen a positive outcome from spreading out the responsibilities.

"When you spread ownership out into the nursery, you see a lot more motivation," he says. Having a good

work force has been crucial for Prides Corner Farms, especially when the company lost 150 employees to an I-9 audit last year. Part of how the company builds a good team is focusing on its younger staff. Sellew says the company makes sure to get them out of the nursery, get them to seminars, and move them around.

"With young people, it's all about your ability to learn," he says. "A lot of the work in our industry is tough, repetitive work. You need to make sure that you're making the work interesting and motivating for the young person. And that means you've got to have them constantly learning."

Sellew realizes that developing that good work force is not always an easy task.

"It's hard to do — you can say that," he says. "We're learning every day here."

Although Prides Corner Farms' team is a critical part of the company, it's its relationships with customers that make a big impact.

"We try to really have a partnership attitude as it relates to our customers," Sellew says. "Understanding our customers as individuals and having that partnership attitude is, to me, so critical." GM

FOR MORE: Prides Corner Farms, (800) 437-5168 or www.pridescorner.com



SPECIFICS

● **Name:**
Prides Corner Farms

● **Headquarters:**
Lebanon, Conn.

● **Founded:**
1979

● **Production space:**
275 acres

● **Major crops:**
Nursery stock, perennials, roses, trees and edibles

● **Major customers:**
Independent garden centers and landscapers

● **Number of employees:**
500 during peak-time

● **Annual revenue:**
\$30 million

3 TIPS FROM MARK SELLEW

1. Get on the road and visit your customers. "Get to know them and find out what you have to do to be relevant in this crowded, competitive marketplace."

2. Develop a great team.

3. Diversify your product line. "Continually diversify and have new plants. Diversity is more complex, but it's more secure financially to have a more diverse inventory."

EXECUTING INNOVATION

HOW METROLINA GREENHOUSES CONTINUOUSLY INNOVATES

By Laura Allen



View innovation as a process, not a product. That's the mentality of Abe VanWingerden and his team at Metrolina Greenhouses, and the company has plenty of proof to show it works.

For starters, Metrolina installed a new TTA transplanter, and the company was able to go from 800 flats per hour to 1,200, which allowed it to get another turn in before Mother's Day. Then there's the new 5-micron water filtration system. The cleaner water has resulted in lower chemical use and an increase in the quality of the plants.

But those are just the beginning. In fact, those only cover Metrolina's greenhouse innovation. The company also focuses on store and consumer innovation.

"You'll find us as a company bucketing our innovations into one of those three areas," says VanWingerden, Metrolina's co-owner. "We're constantly filling those buckets up and then deciding what to use and what not to use."

A recycling program it has with Lowe's and Wal-Mart is one example of store innovation.

After the store sells the product, the customer can return the trays to Metrolina for it to reuse

or recycle, and consumers can also return their pots and trays to the stores. For consumer innovation, Metrolina offers a refill program to consumers, which is a combination in a landscape pot, so the consumer can take it home and drop it into their own container. The program is a big hit, representing 10 percent of combination sales.

But the company didn't come up with all of its successful ideas on its own.

"Our goal is – whether you're an employee, an owner or you're in our stores – to always be thinking of what's a better way to do it," he says.

Looking for improvements can be an easier way to be innovative.

"You'll get very frustrated from an innovation standpoint if you feel you've got to get the big one, because I don't think you really know when you hit the big one anyway," he says.

And have fun with process.

"Innovation is a process not a project. Innovation is not an event, it's a way of doing business," he says. "No matter what size you are you can apply that." **GM**

FOR MORE: Metrolina Greenhouses, (800) 543-3915 or www.metrolinagreenhouses.com

SPECIFICS

- **Name:**
Metrolina Greenhouses
- **Headquarters:**
Huntersville, N.C.
- **Founded:**
1972
- **Production space:**
162 acres of greenhouse; 30 acres outdoor
- **Major crops:**
Poinsettias, mums, spring and summer annuals
- **Major customers:**
98 percent big-box stores: Lowe's, Wal-Mart and Sam's Club
- **Number of employees:**
625 full-time. Around 1,000 during peak time.
- **Annual revenue:**
Around \$150 million

3 TIPS FROM

ABE VANWINGERDEN

1. Copy and paste is okay. "To think we individually, whether we're a big company or small company, can come up with every idea to be unique and stand out is untrue. It's how you execute those ideas that drives your uniqueness, not the idea itself."

2. But on the other hand, be who you are. "Copy and paste is okay if you're copying an idea. Don't try to be another company. Copy and paste good ideas, but execute flawlessly. You'll run out of good ideas periodically, but you never run out of, or have too much of, good execution."

3. Talk to your consumers. "It's not intuitive for a lot of folks. But it's the only way you're going to understand what your consumer wants and why they want it."