

Natural Resources

Any store can work within a small space and tiny budget to create a learning center that can educate—and sell!

BY MELISSA KVIDAHL

Natural products retailers have always prided themselves on being a trusted source of information for their customers. Before the internet, short of making an appointment with a natural doctor, these stores were the only places where shoppers could attain information about natural remedies and prevention.

"The original health food store was, in fact, a natural health care resource center for the community," explained Roy Upton, staff herbalist and general manager for Planetary Herbals (Soquel, CA). "The health food store was the forum that brought the benefits of organic and whole foods to the neighborhood, was the vanguard for low fat, low sodium, no preservatives, the fitness movement and high antioxidant diets that are now commonplace, and was the primary source of information for nutritional and herbal medicine. With the health crisis looming, serving this role is more important than ever."

For many retailers, simply communicating to the customer the benefits of various supplements and foods might serve them well. But according to educators and industry specialists, creating a space reserved in the store specifically for educational purposes could translate to rings at the register.

According to Marymae Lorenzo, sales assistant manager with NOW Foods (Bloomington, IL), many purchasing choices are made right in the store—positively or negatively. A customer might take interest in a product, but wait to research the product at home and consider coming back later to purchase. "Once the customer is out the door, the likelihood that she will come

back in to purchase that particular product is slim to none," Lorenzo warned. "Whereas if she is able to refer to a book or get online right there in the store, she may purchase the product or possibly begin a conversation with a store employee."

This focus on education is at the forefront for Nature's Way, an independent natural products store located in Easton, PA. "The owner is an herbalist and his main philosophy is to educate the customers to make healthy choices for themselves," said the store's manager, Sarah Adams. "We're not just trying to say, 'Come to our store and buy something;' we want to be a hub to get this knowledge out there."

And when it comes to complicated products such as herbs, the need for an in-store resource center is even greater. "Many botanicals have complicated names, and with some botanicals we use different parts of the plant for very different indications," explained Beth Lambert, CEO of Herbalist & Alchemist

(Washington, NJ), citing stinging nettle leaf and seed as an example: while the leaf is more of a tonic, the seed is more of a restorative, she said, while the root is used to support prostate health. "Having a resource ready so that the consumer can clarify these differences at the point of purchase ensures that the consumer will receive the right product."

David Hawkins, owner of Parkersburg, WV-based Mother Earth Foods, knew he needed a resource center when his



Library books at Nature's Way

store became so busy that his employees were unable to speak with customers in a timely manner. "It got to the point where we were so busy that we were tied up at the register. Don't get me wrong, it's a good problem to have. We started our resource center out of necessity," he said. "This way, customers can go to the resource center and learn something while they're waiting for someone to spend time with them."

"The most important reason to have a resource center in-store is that it will increase sales," summed up Bill

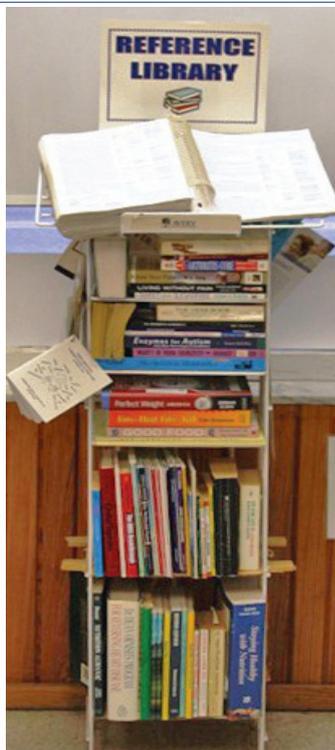
Chioffi, eastern regional sales and education manager with Gaia Herbs, Inc. (Brevard, NC). "There are many new consumers to this category, brought to the aisle through exposure to mass media; they simply want the information they saw on TV validated. If they are too shy to ask a staff member or they are not intercepted, the resource center, if properly equipped, fulfills the customer's need and results in a sale."

Stocking the Center

Creating a well-equipped resource center has its share of challenges,



Supplemental materials at Nature's Way



Reference library area at Mother Earth Foods

though the most common is space.

"Space is always an issue," said Lorenzo. "If you have the space, set up an area that has a couple of small but comfortable chairs and a coffee table—make it warm."

Nature's Way features a sitting area, where customers can go to read the books the store makes available. The library is stocked with books acquired by company or personal donations, and with materials that the store has purchased itself.

Mother Earth Foods met with the space challenge and decided to dedicate just one corner to its books, herbal handbooks and assorted references. "I'm also an herbalist, and I've written

articles for years for local papers, so we have those articles available also," Hawkins said. The articles are available in shelves mounted next to the door—taking up virtually no floor space.

A locked laptop at a podium can serve customers well and also take up little room. "For those that prefer to rely on books, a podium is helpful as well," added Lorenzo. "Place a book or two on the podium and let customers flip through them."

But as Lambert explained, these luxuries come at a price. One way to offset some of the cost of a full library is by tapping into companies that might offer free copies of books that they publish, or finding out if they will sponsor an in-store library. "And always take advantage of book signings at trade shows—for example, David Winston's books are amazing resources and there are always free books signed by him in the Herbalist & Alchemist booth at trade shows," she added.

"Manufacturers and vendors are a great resource, particularly supplement companies," agreed Hawkins. "I try to get materials from the vendors as much as possible."

For stores that can afford it, Chioffi recommended the best type of center: one that appeals to all different types of customers. "I have seen some very well maintained resource centers in my trav-

els, and the most successful ones incorporate multimedia such as an internet-ready computer, DVD player and TV, in addition to printed materials," he said.

Both Nature's Way and Mother Earth Foods feature a television to play DVDs offered by manufacturers, or even, in the case of Mother Earth, radio shows or Dr. Oz specials. "We're getting ready to sponsor The Dr. Oz Show, so our ads will be running," said Hawkins. "That's another way to get that TV medium to work for us."

Introducing the Education Station

Once the resource center is ready, a store can choose to let it do the talking for itself, or sponsor events to acclimate shoppers to the new area.

"Book signings, product demonstrations, educational lectures and healthy cooking demonstrations are all things that grab attention and require interaction from the consumer," offered Lorenzo. "The more positive interaction you give a customer in your store, the more she will enjoy the experience and want to come back."

Upton suggested hosting seminars with herbalists, naturopaths, integrated medical doctors, body workers, nutritionists or chefs, who will often lecture for free to promote practices, books or products.

"This is a niche area that can set you apart, and if you can make it well known and well lit and attractive, people will want to go there," stressed Hawkins. "We as an industry have to do the things that no one else is doing." **VR**



Articles mounted on the wall save space at Mother Earth Foods

i For More Information:

- Gaia Herbs, Inc., (800) 831-7780
- Herbalist & Alchemist, (908) 689-9020
- NOW Foods, (888) 669-3663
- Planetary Herbals, (800) 606-6226