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IN BOX

Getting gardening firm off the ground takes nurturing

April 19, 2010 | By Karen E. Klein

Dear Karen: Can you give me some tips for starting a gardening business?

Answer: Make sure you are passionate about gardening and knowledgeable about the industry. Be persistent in setting and meeting start-up goals.

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"Change can only occur when you make a conscious decision to make it happen," said Tamara Monosoff, author of a new book, "Your Million Dollar Dream."

Research the top issues for gardening businesses, and write down how you will approach each one. This will be the beginning of your business plan, which you should formalize before you start.

Feedback can aid customer service

Dear Karen: How can I improve customer service?

Answer: Ask customers for feedback and then act on it. Prominently display your e-mail and mailing addresses at your business and on your website.

Add a comment box to your website and invite customers to critique their transactions and provide suggestions.

Call a few customers each week to ask how things are and what you can do to help.

"Customers will appreciate your willingness to listen, which is essential when building trust," said Neal Creighton, chief executive of RatePoint Inc., a Needham, Mass., customer relations management firm.

Research before selling abroad

Dear Karen: I'd like to start selling products overseas. Where do I start?

Answer: Make sure there is international demand for your products.

"We counsel sellers to focus on their bestselling products," said Damon Schechter, chief executive of Shipwire, a shipping and fulfillment firm based in Palo Alto.

Explore the customs regulations and the financial implications of bulk shipping into a foreign market and determine what your costs will be.

"Sellers that do their homework can be assured that their products won't get held up in customs," Schechter said.

Questions? E-mail Karen at inbox.business@latimes.com, or: In Box, Los Angeles Times, 202 W. 1st St., Los Angeles, CA 90012.

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