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Case Study

“...what was really broken,
only Best Year Yet could fix.”

New Chief Operating Officer brings Best Year Yet to struggling online plant retailer, moving it from near shutdown to the best sales year in company history

After a great first quarter in 2017, Nature Hills Nursery, Inc., the oldest and largest online nursery in the U.S., endeavored to migrate to a mobile-friendly platform. The errors that riddled that process caused a complete drop-off in sales and almost sank the whole company. Plagued by poor site performance, broken links, and error pages, the company went from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows within one quarter. To help save it from dissolution, Nature Hills hired Trent Minneman as their new Chief Operating Officer.

Trent came to Nature Hills with a wealth of online retail and leadership experience - and years of positive results with Best Year Yet. Trent had used Best Year Yet in his professional and personal life, including within the youth basketball organizations where he coached for over a decade. When he met with Jeff Dinslage, president & CEO of Nature Hills, about joining the team, Trent commented, “Every topic we covered I was like, yep, Best Year Yet can fix that; yep, Best Year Yet can fix that; yep, Best Year Yet can fix that. I knew coming into this role that in addition to all of the internet stuff that I know and could help with, what was really broken, only Best Year Yet Could fix.”



While the owners of Nature Hills were eager to have Trent become their COO, they only reluctantly agreed to participate in the Best Year Yet program he wanted the team to complete. As Trent explained, “**Strategic planning wasn’t necessarily foreign to them, but like everyone, they were pretty jaded toward it because they didn’t want to waste two days just to have everyone walk out of the room feeling pretty good about themselves with a plan that would just sit on a shelf.**” And if the owners were reticent, the staff was downright skeptical.

Walking out of the process two days later, however, had the CEO saying, “We’re doing this every year.” Both the owners and their staff had some cathartic realizations around accountability and closure for the mistakes that had been made, and now they had a plan to turn things around. Trent recalled some particularly powerful moments during the process that helped the company heal and get back on its feet to move forward. “There is a part of the Best Year Yet program that asks people to share their disappointments, let them go, and then eventually learn from them,” said Trent. “When you get to disappointments and people realize that you’re actually honestly asking the questions and truly want honest responses and will accept honest responses, that’s pretty empowering for people, to give them that voice.”



The poignancy of these conversations led the team to uncover some of the missteps in leadership and the cultural issues that caused the botched migration to occur. “What we identified was that most of the failures that occurred really occurred because nobody stepped up and said, ‘That’s mine.’ They were happy assuming that somebody else was going to take responsibility or be accountable for that difficult piece of the puzzle,” reflected Trent. “And if it breaks – and I might even have known it was going to break – but as long as I didn’t say I was responsible for it, then hey, it’s not on me. It was a migration built entirely on assumptions, so it was no wonder that it fell apart in the way that it did.” Trent added, “I think the Best Year Yet process really helped Jeff and the team.”

“The team was able to acknowledge the mistakes and define and learn from them so they weren’t just negative. You’re flipping that negative to a positive, to something you can build on. I think it was very freeing to Jeff. It was almost like the business was forgiving him.”

In the first year since doing their Best Year Yet plan, the Nature Hills team really was having its best year yet and celebrating some fabulous results. After just having had their worst year ever for profitability, revenue was up by 30% to an all-time high, with days where sales were up over 300% year-over-year. Traffic on average was up by 60-70%. Between identifying and seeking feedback from happy customers, providing horticultural consulting calls, and better boxing standards to their vendors, the team was able to significantly raise the company’s Google merchant rating as well. Additionally, the Nature Hills warrantee claim rate on literally hundreds of thousands of plants fell to 1.47%. Trent commented, “**That customer satisfaction led to employee satisfaction, as well. That was a really big one for us.**”

On top of that, availability of inventory drastically improved, providing a big win for the company. Between wildfires in California, hurricanes in the south, and a variety of other factors inherent to farming, being able to identify and keep high velocity products in stock was a challenge. “By this time last year, we were about 78% out of stock,” said Trent. “This year, even given the strongest sales in company history, we’re only 55% out of stock right now at the end of the season. That’s really remarkable. You can’t sell it if it’s not on the shelves, so that’s been a really big success.”



From a culture perspective, Trent also said that team members are learning to work more collaboratively, take responsibility, and focus on what’s most important. He marveled that their Best Year Yet plan gave his team members the power to tell him that sure, they can do something outside of their priorities if he asks, but that in order to do it, they’ll have to sacrifice something else. He said it’s better for him as a leader to see the reality of their bandwidth and how to prioritize additional needs. **“In the absence of that, my team would just be running around chasing all those fires and I would just be sitting back being frustrated because none of it got done.”**

Trent acknowledged their Best Year Yet plan was exactly what the company needed to heal, turn around, and create success after the failed migration, fostering a much greater culture of accountability. He looks forward to the team’s new Best Year Yet plan and where it will lead them in creating their next, even more successful best year yet.

Nature Hills Nursery Highlights

- **Best sales year** in company history
- **Revenue is up by 30%**
- Days where **year-over-year sales are up by 300%**
- **30% year-over-year increase in stock availability**
- Site sales **traffic is up by 60-70%**
- **Warranty claims reduced to 1.47%**

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