

CHARLIE THIGPEN'S GARDEN GALLERY

Laura Hudson
Lhudson3@samford.edu
Ellie Qin
Xqin@samford.edu
Joshua Sheppard
Jdsheppa@samford.edu
Andrew Summerlin
Asummeri@samford.edu
Charles M. Carson
cmcarson@samford.edu

SAMFORD MARION UNIVERSITY

Abstract

For the first two and half years of its operation, Charlie Thigpen's Garden Gallery encountered several of the same issues that face many entrepreneurs in regards to time management and utilization of the right business model and operations. Charlie Thigpen's expertise in gardening, along with his creative mind, was not always used to its full capability with the constantly growing demands of his daily business operations. This inability to properly use his time hindered this small company from reaching its full potential. Due to these unforeseen time constraints and a failed business plan, Charlie and his wife Cindy had to drastically pivot their business's direction in order to achieve their desired success and sustainability for the store. They, like many entrepreneurs, had their livelihood riding firmly upon the success of their business. This husband and wife team had to work together to make decisions that would help better themselves immediately in the retail store and for the future as they considered a transition to garden design focused business. This tandem would need to work diligently to implement new strategies in a low cost and efficient manner as a means to achieve their desired goals for the business.

Key Words: retail family firm, time management, operations, strategic flexibility.

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Sweat was dripping off of Charlie Thigpen as he was watering plants in the hot Alabama sun. These plants, centerpiece items at Charlie Thigpen's Garden Gallery (CTGG; www.charliethigpensgardengallery.com) which Charlie owned with his wife Cindy, were wilting, and drying up and no amount of water and care was bringing them back to life. His business, a locally owned garden shop, was created in hopes of bringing beauty and joy into other peoples' lives. However, two and a half years later, business was struggling. As an experienced gardener Charlie was frustrated that his plants were dying – but that was only part of the problem. Charlie's company was at a crossroads and he and Cindy needed to closely reevaluate their business strategies. As Charlie stated, "when a plant dies we put in into the compost heap – I just hope our business does not end up there, too."

Humble Beginnings

Charlie Thigpen's name was one that many of the 15 million subscribers of *Southern Living* Magazine had grown to recognize. His shared experiences and knowledge had transformed garden after garden throughout his career with the company. The stories and ideas he told inspired many to grow their own gardens and develop a passion for the beauty he helped create. Though he never saw most of the gardens he helped to inspire, knowing that other people had grown to enjoy gardening furthered his own love and passion for gardening. Charlie stated, "Gardening is not about weeding, planting, and watering — It is about the experiences you have while gardening — the rainbow, the hummingbird, the fall branch that turns red, and all the little miracles."

Though Charlie came from a creative family of artists, he worked tirelessly for years to develop into a gardening expert. His love for gardening began at an early age by working alongside his grandmother in her yard and later tending the grounds at Southern Progress Company (SPC) while still in high school. Those experiences taught him the simple beauty that could grow within a garden. His enjoyment of planting, along with his creativity, helped Charlie develop a strong reputation within the company. This earned

respect, along with the vision and appreciation of leaders at SPC, helped Charlie progress within the company. SPC management eventually asked Charlie, their gardener, to write for them about the hands-on experience of gardening. Before he knew it SPC had promoted Charlie to director of landscape and *Southern Living* Magazine's associate garden editor, and Charlie soon started to develop a strong following among *Southern Living* readers.

Also working for SPC at the time was Charlie's wife, Cindy. Cindy had come to work for SPC after a decade in the retail industry. Her experience in this field, paired with her educational background, helped Cindy to become an important component to *Southern Living's* success. Serving as a manager in both marketing and magazine production, as well as eventually becoming the director of creative services, Cindy too had developed a strong reputation and proficiency in her field. Together the two were an integral part of this successful regional company.

In the fall of 2008 things began to change at SPC. Having been purchased as a part of the AOL-Time Warner deal in 2000 (Chambers, 2011), SPC had seen some of its normal operations changed throughout the years by the new owners. However, due to their continued success and high subscription rate, they were able to delay any drastic changes. This all came to a halt in October of 2008. With the economy suffering and many households cutting back on extra spending, magazine subscriptions dropped rapidly. Subsequently advertisements started pulling pages, some 9.3 percent in the first 9 months of 2008 alone (Chambers, 2011). These events greatly affected the bottom line of the business, forcing AOL-Time Warner to reevaluate the SPC campus in Homewood, Alabama. Management made the tough decision to streamline and centralize the organization, blending the company more into its parent company. Numerous magazine titles were cut, including *Cottage Living* and *Southern Accents*. Before all was said and done, some 290 people, or 41.4 percent of the staff from the core Homewood campus, were laid off. Charlie and Cindy's positions were a part of the cuts. Their twenty plus years of service for SPC had come to an end, but their passion for gardening and helping people still burned deep inside.

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Despite the economic downturn nationwide and the struggles of Southern Progress Company on one side of Birmingham, an exciting yet daunting task was underway to revitalize the Lakeview district of downtown Birmingham. Cathy Jones, great great-granddaughter of Birmingham developer Colonel James Withers Sloss, had seen the fall of SPC as an opportunity to bring talented artists of all types to an area looking to be reborn. This revitalization of the Pepper Place (see map in Exhibit 1) area, as it was called, gave many local small business owners the chance to cultivate their dream businesses in an ideal area. Cathy approached the Thigpens with the idea of bringing their expertise to Pepper Place. Though first reluctant, the Thigpens found the area and its Saturday farmer's market to be a great opportunity to open their dream gardening store.

Creating their own business would not come easy, but they felt that their individual experiences and expertise would combine to create a successful team. After the initial wavering of where to set up the business and how to go about executing it, the Thigpens felt that Pepper Place, and their Saturday farmer's market, was too good to pass up. This artsy area helped embody what Charlie and Cindy stood for. It gave them an opportunity to reach out to local growers, farmers, and artists using the Saturday market as a draw to their own business. They would attempt to create the perfect garden store, one complete with advice on the nuances of gardening from Charlie. As Charlie stated, "It is the brick and mortar incarnation of a longtime dream."

With the Lakeview district working on the revitalization of many lofts and apartments, Charlie and Cindy decided they would specialize in container and kitchen gardens. They felt like these smaller gardens would be perfect for people who didn't have the room for a normal garden but still wanted to enjoy the beauty that could come from watching a plant grow and bloom. Due to the close proximity to numerous hospitals, Charlie and Cindy also saw an opportunity to use their creative plant designs to sell and deliver to local patients and their families. These ideas, mixed with revenues from contractual landscape design projects Charlie occasionally performed, would help the Garden Gallery become the type of small business that would be ideal for this husband and wife duo.

Two and half years later, not everything had gone as planned. Charlie and Cindy realized that plants, though their passion, did not have the profit margin and inventory turnover needed to sustain a successful business. The container idea also didn't develop as planned either. Containers were often bought from the Garden Gallery with free and great advice on what to put in and how to properly maintain them; however, customers often went elsewhere for the plants and gardening soil needed. Charlie lamented, "It is difficult to sell many of our plants because a potential customer can go to their local Lowe's and purchase a plant for less than I can buy them wholesale." Their idea on serving the local hospitals and their patients never took off as the targeted customers simply weren't interested. Fortunately for the couple, Charlie had been able to complete many landscape design projects in order to help the company stay afloat.

As time progressed, Charlie and Cindy realized there needed to be a change in their business model. Though they had set out to be a predominantly plant oriented store, the Thigpens began to consider devoting much more of Charlie's time to garden and landscape design. They realized the need for a more stable source of income, as well as a higher profit margin, and believed further entering the garden design industry could be beneficial. Though they had resisted change initially, future success depended on the strategies they would chose to implement and the course of action they set for their business.

Gardening Industry

Charlie Thigpen's Garden Gallery resided within the overarching garden industry as a hybrid. This hybrid constituted both the landscaping and garden design industry as well as the nursery and garden décor retail industry.

After World War II the first notable lawn and garden service industry developed. The post-World War II economic expansion started a housing development boom. In 1944, there were 139,00 housing developments. Yet in the year 1950, the number of housing developments ballooned to 1.9 million. Coinciding with this, "an entire suburban culture emerged, replete with private lawns and gardens, the

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demand for landscape services flourished" (*Lawn and Garden Services*, 2) opening the door for many businesses to earn significant profits. The next major shift in the economy for the gardening industry occurred in the 1990's and 2000's. This shift largely resulted from an increase in two-income families throughout the country. This housing expansion also found many new homeowners with an increased income to fund new gardening projects. "Homeowners in the 1990's came to view sprucing up their lawns and shrubbery as a relatively low-cost way to boost property value as well as spirits. Many experts claimed that gardening became one of the most rapidly developing hobbies among Americans in the 1990's (*Retail Nurseries, Lawn and Garden Supply Sources*, 3). This trend continued through the early 2010's. A study by the National Gardening Association (NGA) found that homeowners spent a record \$44.7 billion to hire professional lawn-care and landscape services in 2006. An estimated 34.5 million U.S. households, or 30%, used at least one type of lawn and landscape service. However, despite such an encouraging past for the industry, the economic recession of the late 2000's altered this growth and placed a strain on businesses operating within the industry.

Industry trends revealed considerable fluctuation over the previous five years. As with most industries in the United States, the gardening market was negatively impacted by the economic recession in the final years of the 2000's. Many Americans sought to save money through cutting back spending in non-essential industries; for many consumers these cutbacks included gardening and lawn care. According to data from the NGA, the number of Americans who indicated that they planned to grow their own food increased from 2008 to 2009 by 7 million or 19 percent. Another study by the NGA estimated that a well-maintained vegetable garden would yield a \$500 average return per year. A study by Burpee Seeds even claimed that \$50 spent on gardening supplies could multiply into \$1,250 worth of produce annually.

Many studies noted a significant decline in consumer participation in the market from 2007-2010, yet more recent research revealed hope for the industry. Although spending on gardening showed a decline during these years, the overall interest in the activity of gardening surprisingly increased. "Overall participation in lawn and garden activities increased by 2 percent last year, reaching 83 million households.

A particular bright spot was food gardening, which gained for the second year in a row, growing by 21 percent. The survey also reports that although spending declined, it declined less steeply than spending in other discretionary categories" (Lesonsky,1).

Although there were many positives associated with the industry, large potential profit meant large competition. This competition emerged primarily through the rise and eventual prominence of competitive chain stores. In response to the threat of competing chain stores (companies that bought in bulk and were able to offer their customers discount prices), many smaller companies "found that narrowing their focus kept them afloat in the industry... Another means of coping with profit losses has been the development of a segment to provide landscaping services" (*Retail Nurseries, Lawn and Garden Supply Stores*, 1).

Charlie's statement shed light into the dynamics of the market as this was a reality for most small businesses within the industry. His business needed to survive, and hopefully prosper, in an industry largely dominated by large chain retailers. As noted previously, Cindy and Charlie began to consider a venture into garden design as an extension of their current enterprise.

"Landscape design accounts for 55% of the industry's annual revenue, more for small firms. The principal service supplied by the industry is landscape design associated with outdoor spaces for housing, non-residential buildings and public spaces (IBISWorld,1). Additionally, it was noted that a significant increase in the construction industry would likely occur as economic conditions continued to improve. Along with this growth in the construction industry more and more households would begin to demand landscaping services. In fact, nearly 25 percent of U.S. household utilized professional lawn care services and the U.S. Department of Labor expected growth in the industry to result in an 18 percent increase in labor between 2008 and 2018. Overall, despite an understandable decline in the industry during the economic recession of the late 2000's, the future of the gardening industry showed ample promise.

The most recent NGA survey conducted in 2012 stated:

"Nationwide, household participation in do-it-yourself lawn and garden activities showed a welcome increase of 3 million more households (3%) in 2011 compared with the year before, translating

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into an extra \$688 million (2%) in retail sales of Lawn and Garden across the nation. In total U.S. households spent \$29.1 billion on their lawns and gardens last year. Average annual spending on lawn and garden activities per household was flat at around \$351 per year."

The best way for Cindy and Charlie to adapt was to identify which unique skills and services differentiated their company from their competitors. Finding this "niche" within the industry would prove vital to the survival and prosperity of Charlie Thigpen's Garden Gallery.

Current Situation / Problem Areas and Opportunities

Online Presence

While Charlie and Cindy had a website for their retail store, they did not sell merchandise online. This was something that they had considered to increase sales. "The U.S. online retail sector has experienced strong, double digit growth since 2010. Strong growth is predicted to continue until the end of the forecast period in 2016 (MarketLine). "The online and mobile shopping trend that is expanding at a rapid rate is decreasing the foot traffic in physical stores and encouraging retailers to focus their resources towards technology rather than real estate (Farfan)."

Expanding a brick and mortar retail store's responsibilities to include an online market would involve a large amount of time and dedication. An employee or online partner would need to be designated to manage the website regularly. This would include managing inventory levels, shipping orders out to customers, and interacting with customers.

There were numerous inherent advantages offered with expansion into an online market. First, operating an online store could result in their store being able to reach a larger customer base along with other opportunities to expand the product line. Additionally, their online store would be open 24 hours a day, 365 days per year, and would enable the store to offer products and services at the customers' convenience. Another advantage would be the ability to build customer loyalty. An online store could also

be advantageous in attempts to collect customer information. This could enable the store to reach more customers with targeted promotions or product offerings.

While there were several advantages to selling online, there were also some disadvantages. Expansion to an online store required a long-term investment. The website would need to be updated frequently with pictures and product descriptions, site links must be checked to ensure that they were activated, and new prices and promotions must be added as warranted. Another disadvantage to an online store was issues with customer security and privacy. Online stores were often held liable if they failed to protect their customers' private information. Also, there could be logistical challenges with development of an online entity. If their store could not keep up with an increased demand through timely product delivery, they would risk losing their customers.

Marketing

Because the Thigpens had not generated the desired profit in their retail store, they were not able to justify spending money on advertising. Further complicating the issue was the location of their store. Though the Farmer's Market drove business on Saturdays, their store location was not conducive to everyday business as it was out of the way and not easy to find. Due to the limited traffic, Charlie and Cindy admitted that some form of advertising was likely necessary for growth.

Charlie and Cindy had established a website, a blog, and a Facebook page. Their website contained a short video along with vibrant pictures and information. The website consisted of details on what type of plants and merchandise they sold, background information on Charlie and Cindy, a link to Charlie's blog, information on their monthly gardening classes, testimonials, and press. Charlie and Cindy wanted to use the website as a platform for keeping in contact with customers. There were approximately sixty customers who left their email addresses on the homepage of their website. However, the lack of marketing still proved an obstacle and limited their brand awareness. Charlie and Cindy did not know how to further

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market their business while keeping costs down, and they started to doubt the returns the website was producing in comparison with the time they spent working on it.

Blogs provided small businesses with a chance to share their knowledge and expertise to a larger audience. They required little to no capital, and would greatly increase communication. Though one of Charlie's strengths was writing, his attempt at a blog had fallen short. This unsuccessful attempt was not due to the ideas and help he was providing but instead a lack of commitment. The overwhelming daily operations of the business made it difficult to maintain the blog and it had not been updated in nine months.

Facebook and Twitter allowed small businesses to present their products to a large and diverse audience that ranged in age, income, geographical location, and interests. "As of August 2011, businesses with Facebook pages have access to the social networks audience of more than 750 million active users. This type of access provides the potential for greater visibility and a chance to capture a larger share of the market (Brookins). "About 80 percent of small business owners and top executives say they now use a social network" (Schubarth). Though this information shows the growing trend, a struggle continues for owners as "59 percent of small business owners said that social media has either 'not met' or only 'slightly met' their expectations, yet 77.5 percent of the respondents plan to spend more on social media in 2011. This suggests that entrepreneurs see the value of social media but are still trying to master it. Forty-three percent of small business owners surveyed indicated they have allocated only 0-10 percent of their marketing budgets to social media. Plus, 36.5 percent of the small business owners said they update their social media content only once a week or less" (Protalinski). It was very important to not only have Facebook and Twitter accounts, but also to keep them continuously updated as a way to maintain customer engagement. The Thigpens had hired an employee to come in on Fridays to manage social media. Their Facebook page could be found at <https://www.facebook.com/CharlieThigpensGardenGallery>. They had yet to employ the use of an Instagram or Twitter account.

Charlie had been featured on WBRC Fox 6 News to promote his expertise in the garden business. This was free advertisement for Charlie and his store. He could have taken steps to potentially become a regular guest on the show if he made it a priority.

Charlie had successfully bartered with local magazine *B-Metro* in which CTGG would receive a fourth of a page of free advertisement in exchange for his writing of a monthly column for the magazine. This magazine had a subscription rate of approximately 60,000 and offered CTGG a great opportunity to reach new customers in the greater Birmingham area. Worth noting is that Charlie did feel that his relationship to and loyalty with *B-Metro* magazine limited him from producing the same arrangement with other magazines in Birmingham.

Inventory

Charlie and Cindy provided an array of unique products in their retail store. The merchandise that they offered ranged from plants to garden accessories and home decorations. The Garden Gallery strived to offer a wide variety of products so it could become the complete garden store for its customers. However, for a small business like the Garden Gallery, this wide variance in inventory caused numerous problems. CTGG, tried to answer nearly all of the perceived wants and needs of their customers. They limited their potential profits by placing many of their more profitable items on the floor and using shelf space for objects that had slow turnover and low profit margins. For instance, the Thigpens noticed the disadvantage that plants gave the store over time. They had to be purchased from their supplier at a higher price than their potential customers could buy them from the big box stores. The plants, though they helped to offer desired variety and image for the shop, took a lot of care, and offered little in the way of profits. It was quite common that many of the gallery's plants had to be thrown away if no one bought the plant before its life cycle was up. This short plant life, in addition to slow turnover and low profit margin, hindered the growth of their retail store.

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Since the Thigpens did not have a reliable set of financial documents nor a proper and updated inventory management system in place, it was of little surprise that the needed change developed at a slow pace. A proper inventory management system would help them keep an accurate measure on total sales of each item, how long it took to sell those items, and could track how much merchandise they currently had on hand. This proper understanding of the products could have affected their pricing strategy.

Time Management

As often the case of small business owners, Charlie was having a hard time managing his valuable time. In his own words, Charlie felt like he was always putting out "little fires." These "little fires," such as a broken water pipe or dying plant, took away the most important asset of the business. These small tasks prevented Charlie from doing what he did best and what benefited the company most: Charlie's creativity. On a normal day Charlie, a man who could make approximately \$130 dollars an hour performing landscape design, relegated himself to a task (watering plants) that could be carried out by a less skilled worker for slightly more than minimum wage. Charlie did not always feel comfortable delegating work to others. Like many entrepreneurs who have their family's well being to worry about, Charlie feared that the lesser tasks may not be done properly; subsequently causing the business to suffer. Further complicating his time and the level of stress for both Charlie and Cindy, was the couple's lack of planning. After two years, their original business plan held little relevancy to their current business situation. Though they had general ideas, Charlie and Cindy struggled to prioritize daily tasks or to plan strategies long-term. Often it was hard to see the bigger picture in stressful situations; the burden of daily operations overshadowed the future goals for the Thigpens who were just trying to make it each day. Charlie and Cindy recognized the need to increase the effectiveness of their time management and were prepared to take the necessary steps to institute this change.

Finances

Before Charlie and Cindy established their business in October 2009, they created a business plan. The financial information listed in the business plan estimated how much Charlie and Cindy would spend to get the store in business as well as their expected initial profits. According to their outline, Charlie and Cindy's plan was to begin earning significant profit within three years. In the short-run, their goal was that the revenue from sales could cover most of the overhead expenses associated with a new business start-up. As the business continued to progress, Cindy began to take responsibility for the business' finances (see Exhibit 2). However, due to the daily stress the business produced, Cindy struggled to execute a yearly budget. Rather than follow a yearly budget, the company was often forced to try to account for things daily. This made it difficult to control the overall costs of the company and manage the spending of the gallery.

Design

A critical decision point for the Thigpens centered upon the implementation of garden and landscape design as an additional facet of the company. Charlie generally performed these services in his free time and these services accounted for just over \$14,000 of revenue in 2011. However, this aspect of their business was often hindered due to Charlie's prior time commitments to the retail shop. These commitments consisted largely of watering plants, handling product shipments, arranging garden decor, in addition to many other miscellaneous activities around the shop. Charlie and Cindy took much pride in the appearance and unique style of their shop and Charlie stressed that "not just anyone can water plants correctly." Charlie devoted approximately three to four hours every day of the week to watering the plants. Additionally, Charlie spent a large amount of his time interacting with and giving free gardening advice to visitors. Unfortunately, the Thigpens noticed that many of these visitors did not spend money at their shop.

A transition into garden design would require Charlie to have less influence on the shop in order to focus on design projects. Thus, the need for promotion within the company or the hiring of a new employee was considered. The Thigpens believed that finding a reliable, skillful, and honest person would

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be vital to carrying out Charlie's daily activities around the shop. The Thigpens worried that finding such a person could become a real obstacle in achieving the goal of allowing Charlie to focus his time elsewhere.

The Thigpens estimated that Charlie earned approximately \$130 an hour providing garden design services, yet their financial statements provided little additional information in this regard. Charlie said he had more demand for his designing services than he could handle and was forced to delay or turn several jobs down on a regular basis, thus indicating a stable demand for his designing services.

An additional consideration for the Thigpens was the creation of a separate space specifically for the purpose of designing gardens and holding meetings. The Thigpens believed creating this space would hold several advantages for their business such as legitimizing the design aspects of their operation and allowing for the display of previous design work performed by Charlie. Fortunately, a room up above the retail shop served as a crude office for the Thigpens and could be converted into the desired space with relative ease.

Conclusion

Despite their knowledge and passion for gardening, the Thigpens lacked several key elements vital to the success of a small business. A new approach needed to be integrated into their new business model to ultimately generate their desired profits. The Thigpens found themselves at a crossroad with a number of important considerations. If Charlie relied more upon Cindy and the other employees to manage the retail side of their business so that he could focus on design work, how would that change the operations and dynamics of the company? Should the company utilize online options as a way to increase sales and gain access to free marketing through social media; and if so, how? A challenging yet exciting series of decisions laid ahead for the Thigpens and the fulfillment of their dream hung in the balance. If Charlie and Cindy did not make significant changes their dream would die, just like the plants that Charlie kept trying to save.

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