

Smile after Smile

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Rep Corner

Whether it's growing and selling Christmas trees, or satisfying a dental practice, the goal is the same for Andy Mutch: Smiles.

By Laura Thill

From January through December, Michigan-based Benco dental territory representative Andy Mutch can think of no better job than working with his dental customers to ensure their needs are met. But, come Thanksgiving, customer service takes on a whole new meaning for him and his family. When he turned 13, his parents pursued a longtime dream of purchasing land and starting a Christmas tree farm, where families could come to select their holiday tree. Although it took a solid eight years to grow and harvest the trees to the point where *Mutch's Hidden Pines* could open its doors to the public, since then, they have hosted as many as 6,000 people in any given holiday season.



Andy Mutch with wife, Beth, and two daughters, 8-year-old Natalie and 6-year-old Elise

"It's great seeing people take time to make family memories, especially during the holiday hustle," Mutch says. "I like to see them away from their work, away from their electronic devices and out with their families, continuing – or starting – an annual tradition. Generally, our customers are relaxed and excited to welcome the holiday. Some families wear matching Santa hats, some tail gate in the parking lot, some sing Christmas carols on the wagon rides, some bring their dogs and some have snowball fights!"

A balancing act

Having a father who is a dentist and experiencing life in a dental office taught Mutch early on what it meant to own a business and work with clients. His brother, Nate, elected to follow in their father's footsteps as a dentist, and Andy Mutch earned an MBA and joined Benco eight years ago as a dental field sales rep. His pre-dental undergrad experience, coupled with a graduate business degree and the diverse tools offered by Benco, have enabled him to bring a unique value to his dental customers, he notes. "I truly enjoy meeting with and helping customers improve the success of their office," he says.

Indeed, the value of hard work and great customer service was ingrained in Mutch from as far back as he can remember. So, when his parents purchased their farm, located about 80 miles north of Detroit, Mich., he was completely on board. "It was our family's tradition to get a Christmas tree every year, so naturally I thought this would be a really cool endeavor." It took him a while to realize just how much time he and Nate would spend helping bring this project to life.

"The farm was our full-time residence, and it was a great experience growing up there," Mutch continues. "We actually started to plant trees prior to moving to the farm. There was an old farmhouse on the property, and after we finished planting the first field, we began remodeling the farmhouse in order to move in. Between the tree farm, the house remodel, school and sports, life was always pretty busy. We all worked hard and it truly paid off." If there was a downside, it was that his friends had to think twice about hanging out at the Mutch farm, he jokes. "They knew they would be put to work!"

Balancing farm chores with school and sports wasn't always easy, Mutch points out. But, it taught him to stay focused and organized – skills that continue to serve him as a sales rep, parent and businessperson today. "My parents always stressed the importance of education first, so school

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work was the priority," he says. "In addition, I was also involved in sports (basketball, soccer, and football), student council and the National Honor Society. Beyond school, there were expectations that I would help with the farm work prior to social activities. Looking back, I do feel it taught me a great work ethic, responsibility and time management, and truly helped me learn to set goals and prioritize."

Survival of the crop

New business endeavors are almost always a learning experience, particularly in the early years. The Mutch family's experience was no different. "A Christmas tree farm is truly a difficult business to start, since you don't see a return on your crop for years to come," says Mutch. At the same time, it's necessary to invest in farm equipment and tractors, and the family wanted to remodel an old barn on the land, which they envisioned as a future holiday store and event venue. "I was 13 when we began, and by the time we opened to the public and sold our first tree, I was close to finishing college!

"There is a lot of work that goes into preparing and maintaining the land, and the maintenance of the trees – some of which you can control, and others you cannot," Mutch explains. "There were a few fields we struggled with, and we actually lost a large percentage of our crops three years in a row. Sometimes we learned our lessons the hard way, but we quickly discovered that different tree species grow better – or worse – in certain soil compositions. Some trees are more susceptible to disease, some trees have a higher tolerance for drought, some thrive better with direct sun and limited shade, and others require more consistent trimming and leader maintenance.

"We may have had a slow start, but since opening to the public, we've increased our business every single year. We've adjusted our marketing, expanded the parking lot and added wagons and tractors to the fleet. We've also added a Santa house and improved the Christmas barn, where we sell our merchandise." Joining the Michigan Christmas Tree Association (MCTA) has been especially helpful, he notes. "MCTA offers a tremendous amount of information regarding business operations, crop success and overall best practices. We are still members to this day. At one point my dad was even a member on the board!"

Today, four generations of the Mutch family are involved in the business. For Mutch, his wife, Beth, and two daughters, 8-year-old Natalie and 6-year-old Elise, the farm and its visitors have come to symbolize an annual tradition. From planting trees to taking hot chocolate orders, working at the register with their mom and decorating wreaths, the girls can be quite helpful, he notes. "Although, I'd say their favorite things are helping me drive the tractors and honking the horn," he adds.

"My grandparents have been a big part of the farm as well, planting with us every April and staying through much of the Christmas season," says Mutch. "Prior to my grandmother's passing, she was always known as the cocoa-lady. My grandfather still works weekends baling and preparing Christmas trees for departure. It is so nice to be able to spend time together. I feel blessed!"

A year-round effort

Although the tree farm opens to the public the first Friday following Thanksgiving – and remains so each Friday, Saturday and Sunday up to Christmas day – planting and harvesting takes place all year long. "There is always something that needs to be done," says Mutch. "In April, we prep the fields and figure out how many trees we can appropriately space and plant. We usually bring in a work crew – including friends and family – to help plant the trees. My daughters are now a part of this experience, as well." Rain or shine, come mid-April, they plant. At least once, they planted 5,000 trees. "The new trees are left to grow the remainder of the year while we trim and maintain the rest of the trees, which we plan to sell in the coming season. The rest of the year is consumed with mowing, spraying, trimming, pinecone removal, insect control, fertilizing and weed control. "As we approach the Christmas season, we tag each tree to be sold, informing families how tall the tree is, what type of tree it is and also its price," he explains.

In addition, the family has generated several ideas through the years to enhance the visitor experience. "The farm actually offers a lot for families," says Mutch. For one, visitors have a choice of purchasing a pre-cut tree or cutting their own. "We offer a wagon ride from field to field," he says. "In addition, we have a Christmas barn where visitors can warm up and enjoy a complimentary cup of homemade hot chocolate. The barn is filled with merchandise for purchase too, including wreaths, ornaments, sock gifts, etc." And, of course, the highlight for most children is the farm's Santa Claus. "Santa has his own little log cabin, where kids can have their picture taken and receive a candy cane."

The farm Christmas shop is stocked with a variety of Christmas merchandise, including stockings, ornaments, wreaths, local honey, maple syrup, seasonal decorations, hot cocoa and more. "We usually purchase merchandise in January for the following season," he says. "These items generally arrive in the summer, and we sort, tag and display them in the barn. The family has also added classes for guests looking to make their own wreath, and they make it a point each year to host one of the local schools for special needs children.

Indeed, the family's hard work has paid off. "We currently have about 50,000 Christmas trees in the ground," says Mutch. After years of trial and error, they now focus on five trees that appear to be popular and sturdy: Blue Spruce, Fraser Fir, Douglas Fir, Concolor Fir and Canaan Fir. And, last year, they welcomed a record high of 6,000 guests.

It's no surprise that Mutch is at the top of his game during the holiday season. After all, looking out for customers is what he does best. Apart from assisting his family as the need arises, he generally helps guide customers through the u-cut process, educates them about the trees and the farming process and helps cut/carry trees. "I make sure all operations run smoothly," he says. "I know my dad must have faith in me because if there is ever an unhappy customer or complaint, all issues are directed to me – unless he just doesn't want to deal with that!"

"One other neat thing I'm in charge of is helping coordinate a Christmas work party for one of the local businesses each year," he continues. "We bring in a heated tent where they can cater food for all of their employees. We've created vouchers for these employees for a discount off of a tree or a wreath. They have free rein on the farm and can ride the wagons or visit Santa. It's a fun time!"

"I've been blessed with the opportunity to learn from two family businesses – my dad's dental practice and our Christmas tree farm," Mutch says. "Managing a Christmas tree farm and being exposed to all aspects of a dental practice definitely has truly taught me a lot! We have great family dinner discussions and I've learned a lot about the importance of teamwork, helping people improve, holding myself to high standards and constantly striving to do better. All of these attributes have helped me understand my dental customers' needs, as well, enabling me to go above and beyond what it takes to improve their business. One of Benco's mottos is, *We deliver success smile after smile*. This holds true for the Christmas tree business as well."

But as far as the tree farm is concerned, Mutch admits he and his family must credit some of their success to someone else. "I suppose the farm's motto would have to be, *Santa delivers smiles candy cane after candy cane*," he says. And that means more dental needs, he jokes.

I do!

For Benco sales rep Andy Mutch, his family's Christmas tree holds a special meaning. It's an opportunity for his family and extended family to work side by side to create a special experience for the thousands of guests who visit each holiday season to cut down a tree, visit Santa, build a wreath, or simply relax with a cup of cocoa and browse through their holiday store. It's also where Mutch proposed to his wife 11 years ago. "It was carefully planned – that is for sure," he recalls. "All of our Christmas trees are tagged, and that year I secretly changed some of the labels. I had my dad call Beth (my girlfriend at the time) to come help label trees for certain customers who supposedly were going to pick them up. My dad explained that they were unable to do it because they had to go out of town, so she agreed, not knowing what was in store."

"It was March 25th, and to our surprise, it was a beautiful, snowy Saturday," he continues. "Upon arriving, we marched out to the field. I followed Beth from tree to tree with a clipboard while she read the names on the tags out loud. Several of the trees were tagged with first name and last initial, like *Will U*. As we continued up and down the rows of trees, she came upon a tag that just said 'Beth.' She paused for a moment, and I quickly explained this must have been the tree I chose for her the year prior, which we never cut down."

"Beth continued to the next tree, which read, 'Will U.' and I documented what she said. The next tree was labeled as 'Mary,' and the following tree was tagged 'me?' Beth paused with the tag in her hand and turned around to question what was going on. I had knelt down in the snow with a ring in my hand and tears in my eyes. She said, 'Yes!' and we have been happily married for almost 11 years! In fact, we've transplanted that tree to our own yard to remember the day!"

Editor's note: for more information about Mutch's Hidden Pines, visit mutchshiddenpines.net

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