

# Sew up loyalty

*Former clothing designer says small, flexible companies have an edge*

**C**aprice Aerts doesn't have a huge interior plantscaping company. In her words, it's just "comfortable." Yet, her customer list and reputation have been growing steadily for the past 15 years. During that time, Artscape, Inc., located in Royal Oak, Michigan, has expanded from having one customer in 1991 to today servicing more than 175 high-end offices, medical centers, and other commercial properties in and around Detroit.

Aerts grew her young business by building good relationships and taking the attitude that there's no such thing as "no" when it comes to serving customers. She has also taken her time. "After being in business 15 years, we've learned to be more selective about the properties we take on," says Aerts. "Being picky has allowed us to control our growth, and it has contributed to our reputation as a quality company."

## Late bloomer

Before starting her company, Aerts had spent several years in the retail and wholesale clothing business, at one time actually marketing her own line of leather jackets called "Caprice." Indeed, the path from college to selling and installing interior plants was an indirect one.

After graduating with a degree in fine arts in the late 1970s, Aerts began working for a leather company in San Francisco. She designed jackets there for a few years before returning to her home state of Michigan, where she took a job at a

## Featured Member

**Artscape, Inc.**  
**Royal Oak, Michigan**  
**Caprice Aerts, president**



garment leather shop, and later opened her own leather store.

"Being an entrepreneur was always in my blood," Aerts recalls. "It didn't take me long working for someone else to realize that I would be happier running my own business. I opened a retail clothing store and sold custom-made leather jackets to area sports stars and other personalities. Soon, I was marketing my own line and operating a wholesale clothing business."

The business, though, became increasingly competitive at about the same time the owner was showing signs of burnout from all of the traveling associated with producing and marketing her clothing line. She closed up shop and sold her inventory, and was soon approached by an interior plantscaping company to be its sales director.

"I loved plants and grew up around a mother and sister who had green thumbs, but I wasn't a horticulturist by any means," Aerts recalls. "The company wanted me for my sales experience. I accepted the position and learned more about plants while working on the job." The entrepreneurial bug bit her again, though, and in 1991, she started Artscape with one developer client.

## Straightforward approach

The owner describes her company's success by using terms such as "consistency," "strong ethics," "appreciation," and "flexibility," all of which relate to the customer. "I truly appreciate all of my customers," says Aerts. "We stay in contact with each other, and I make it a point to routinely call on them. If there's one complaint I repeatedly hear about other suppliers, it's their lack of attentiveness. Customers will say, 'I never see the tech,' or 'The owner never calls.' After years of being in retail and working with customers, I've learned the importance of building and keeping relationships."

Aerts is not bashful about sharing her knowledge and experience with her employees or telling them how important it is to be consistent, timely, and ethical in how they conduct business. "An 8-inch plant is an 8-inch plant, not a 6-inch plant," says Aerts, "and being on time means showing up when you promised you would."

It may be a cliché, but this owner still thinks the customer is always right. And, if not always right, there at least should be a way to work out problems or differences, she adds. "My husband and I recently had a bad experience at a tennis shop

where we have been long-time customers," she relates. "To make a long story short, we wanted to exchange an item for something else. We missed the exchange deadline by only a few days, but neither the owner nor manager would budge a bit. In fact, they were rude. We were willing to accept something less, but they were virtually intransigent, and they lost a customer because of their position."

She continues, "My customers tell me I'm flexible and willing to work with them. I guess that's one advantage of being a relatively small company. I believe smaller companies also have a better chance to be more profitable than their larger counterparts, just from lack of overhead."

### Defining moments

Artscape has had several defining moments over the years. Aerts points to two of them. "Becoming a mem-


ber of PLANET's legacy association, ALCA, was huge," she emphasizes. "When I first started in business, I networked with several members and asked them a lot of questions. I still have a good network of friends.

"Two years ago, I won a day with a PLANET Trailblazer. Ironically, I was on the committee that originally came up with the Trailblazer program. Terry Anderson, CLP, from BRICKMAN was my trailblazer, and he since has helped me immensely with a few growing pains and restructuring issues. I cannot say enough about how important networking and having access to a professional like Terry have been to my company's success."

Not to say her business today is without its challenges. Michigan's economy is among the most difficult in the country, and rising fuel and freight costs pose ongoing threats to

profitability. "Most of my customers have been agreeable to a small fuel surcharge," says Aerts, "but even then, a surcharge only partially covers rising costs. We just have to learn to be more efficient."

Another ongoing issue is keeping employees satisfied. Artscape pays its employees top dollar, but as Aerts emphasizes, money isn't everything. She quickly draws a comparison between retaining employees and retaining customers. The common bond, she says, is communication — it's being open and letting customers and employees know how important they are to your company. "In fact, I tell my employees outright that I don't work for myself," she says. "Instead, I work for them, and I work for our customers."

Aerts has learned from experience that if you sew up the loyalty from both groups, success will follow. 



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