

## Columns

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### The Knowledge Gap

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As spring arrives, I want to take just a minute (that's about all you've got, I know) and conduct a quick exercise. Think about a product or group of products you know very little about, whether it's computers or running shoes or cooking utensils. Now pretend you'd like to make a significant purchase in this area soon, despite knowing very little about it. How would you go about learning what you need to know to feel confident in your decisions?

If it were me, I would head straight to Google. As a (ahem) 40-year-old woman, Google is my first stop for just about everything. I might visit a store (online) that I think would be knowledgeable in that area. For example, Best Buy for computers. Or Williams-Sonoma for utensils. Worst-case scenario, I head to Amazon and read reviews. If I knew of an independent store that sold those products, I'd visit their website, too.

I'd look for information about how to compare products, and I'd look for product specifications and reviews. I may then go on Facebook and ask friends for recommendations. Notice I haven't set foot outside my door yet.

Now there are a couple of caveats with this. Not everyone researches online like a maniac like yours truly. Some head straight to the store and speak to a sales associate. My challenge to you is to find out in what ways your customers research products. Are you missing sales because your website isn't robust, and customers and (even worse) potential customers get frustrated by lack of information there? Are they coming into the stores and unable to find help with attentive customer service? What other ways can you set up the store to help them find the information they need?

Now let's add the newbie factor. Garden centers may be fun for experienced gardeners, but to anyone starting out, it's like you researching that topic you know little to nothing about. It's incredibly intimidating—all those tables of plants lined up aisle after aisle with all the weird names. Who knows what's the right thing to pick?

With our livelihood depending on a generation that, let's face it, didn't get a whole lotta time in the garden (I'm lookin' at you Millennials), we have a whole lot of educating to do. In 20 years, the oldest Baby Boomers will be, well, not your customers. So we need to cultivate future generations by offering them easy ways to research our products.

I'm going to put in a plug here for an even younger generation. Let's get gardening knowledge to the kiddos NOW. Search out preschools, daycares, elementary and middle schools, high school greenhouse projects, scout organizations, summer camps, boys and girls clubs—any organization that works with kids. Create a short program that involves planting, pollinator gardens, growing your own food; anything that gets their hands in the dirt. I've worked with both Girl Scouts and local schools on pollinator projects, and the kids really want to care. They want to help and kids who want to help typically get their parents to go along with their altruistic acts.

It's imperative we act now and not let any other generations slip through without knowing where their food comes from, how bees and butterflies pollinate, and why flowers are essential to a lifetime of happiness. **GP**