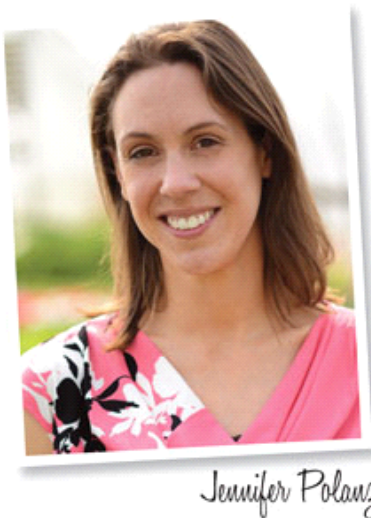


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## Putting Out the Vibe

*Jennifer Polanz*



The problem with creating a vibe in the retail setting is there's no way to really define it or what it should be. A vibe, of course, is a feeling or emotion a customer gets from your place.

So (you knew this was coming, right?) what's your vibe? Is it laid back? Is it energetic and exciting? Is it unkempt and standoffish? Or perhaps, worst of all, void of all care about the customer's experience?

Because in the end it's the customer's experience that really matters. We all know this, but sometimes it's easy to get complacent and to forget that if a customer isn't impressed by something in your store, they won't be back (and neither will any of their friends, on social media or in real life).

So how can you put out the vibe? There're lots of subtle ways to impact a customer's shopping experience and their feelings toward your store. I realized this more than ever on the recent GCA Summer Tour in Seattle. We visited 15 very different garden centers, as well as the iconic Pike Place Market (talk about vibe—that place had it in spades!).

One of the coolest stops was the Molbak's location, which, even after six decades, has still found a way to stay fresh and relevant. Imagine my surprise when wandering through the garden center I found a piano. The inspiration came from a similar piano showing up in a local park, says Matt Porter, live good operations manager for Molbak's and bus captain. So they tried the same thing at Molbak's. "People started playing it immediately," Matt says. They also have live music in the greenhouse every Saturday during spring from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., which is right around the time the crowds began to lull. Matt says the music perked up shoppers and kept them browsing longer.

Music is a great addition and I was surprised to find there were several stops on our tour that didn't play it. I realize music can be polarizing—pick the wrong type and you can put out the opposite vibe intended. I feel it's a risk to take, though, as many of these locations had everything going for them except the vibe that music helps to create.

What else affects your vibe? Cleanliness, for sure. If your store isn't clean, you definitely put out the "I don't care about customers" vibe. Colors, textures and finishes also impact a shopper's experience. Have you kept up with the trends? Are you at least in this decade? At the very least, grab some pallets and use that natural wood to your

advantage.

How can we help with this vibe situation? Merchandising inspiration from trendy Seattle stores on the tour. Then check out John Johnston's tips on how to fix up a variety of spots in the greenhouse for a better look.

One of your best points of interest for setting the vibe is the plant material, and to make sure it looks its best, it has to be properly watered. Garden writer (and long-time garden center manager) Diana Stoll looks at training employees to water effectively. And, finally, there are few companies that understand the vibe better than LiveTrends and CEO Bisser Georgiev completes a two-part series this month looking at the Moment of Relevance and how to satisfy the consumer, who now holds all the power in the seller-consumer relationship. **GP**