

Columns

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Customer Service: It's Not About the Food (Nor the Plants)

Judy Sharpton



RETAILready
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In the April issue of Bon Appétit, the BA Foodist discusses customer service pet peeves in the restaurant business, noting that the most annoying practices often have little to do with the food. I was struck by how similar the issues were to customer service complaints in the horticulture industry, most having nothing to do with the plants. Although independent garden centers invariably cite customer service and product quality as their unique marketing positions, consumers continue to complain about the lack of the very service garden centers brag about. A look at what consumers perceive as customer service could focus our attention.

Here are the restaurant pet peeves that can be transferred to our retail environments.

No one to greet you as you arrive or say thank you as you leave.

Garden center staff is often so absorbed in product maintenance—watering, dead heading, stocking—that they are blind to the presence of the customer. When Watering Wand Disease sweeps through a staff, it can be more devastating than the worst infestation of thrips; staff is so concentrated on not missing one pot that they miss the perplexed customer standing nearby.

The key is to remember to greet, not question. If every staff member simply says, “Good morning,” and then hushes, at some point the customer arrives at a comfort level that initiates interaction. Then, she’ll tell you what she’s looking for. As for the “thank you,” the reason for this is so obvious it begs explanation. The customer has just spent money in the store. Say “thank you” at the register. Sadly, it is often the customer who says, “thank you” and the staff who responds, “no problem.” Say “thank you!”

Waiters who say the wrong thing.

You know those annoying formulaic opening comments: “Hello, my name is Tom and I’ll be your waiter tonight.” “Have you dined with us before?” “Everything on the menu is great.” A nametag and presence at the

table addresses the first comment. Any question that can be answered with “yes” or “no” is a waste. Everything on the menu probably isn’t great given the individual preferences of so many customers. I don’t care how wonderful the liver and onions are; I’m not going to eat them.

In garden centers, we often ask the wrong questions, starting with “May I help you?” Most customers have no idea just what they are looking for and therefore cannot answer that question with anything more than a self-protective “No thank you, just looking.” That question is an immediate dead end. We often ask questions the customer simply has no information about. Sun or shade? Wet or dry? Huh? Please refer to No. 1 above: Greet and hush. When the customer does engage about a plant, ask a really important and easy question: What colors do you like? When the customer has answered a question with confidence, then discuss whether the garden is in the sun or mostly in shade.

Clearing the table before the meal is finished, or dirty tables going uncleared.

You know that sinking feeling when everyone’s plate has been removed and you’re still trying to get the supposedly “great” liver and onions down. You also know the fragrance of half-eaten garlic mashed potatoes on a dirty plate at the next table. Garden centers have their own messes and customers see all of them. They see the weeds. They step over the hose being pulled down an aisle. They see the grime on the back of the restroom door and the dust bunnies in the overhead fan. As independent retailers, we pride ourselves in creating an inviting shopping environment, installing display gardens and creating seating areas. The little messes can negate all of that. If you can’t see the little messes, invite a customer to walk the store and point out annoyances.

For a more complete discussion of customer service turnoffs, go to About.com and take a look at the article by Shari Waters titled, “Top Ten Ways to Turn Off Customers.” If you’ve been to any of my programs you won’t be surprised that dirty bathrooms are No. 1. The list also includes crowded aisles, disorganized checkout counters and lack of shopping carts. Sounds all too familiar. **GP**

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