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Treat Customers Like Toddlers

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By no means would I ever consider myself an expert in children. However, my wife and I have enrolled ourselves in a crash course in parenting. Over the past four years we have grown our family of two into a loving and crazy family of five, plus one dog and two cats. This December, Courtney and I had to make the transition from man-to-man coverage to a zone defense now that we are outnumbered by our children. While I haven't yet found outlets to apply my new skills of MMA officiating between my two boys, or my extensive knowledge of all the names of every train, plane and bus on the Island of Sodor, I do think I can transfer my understanding of dealing with toddlers to how we interact with our retail customers in our garden centers.

Toddlers Can't Read

If you read the same book to your toddler over and over again, they might memorize the words of the book on specific pages and read that page to you. No need to start saving for Harvard. This doesn't mean they can read at two years old. The way toddlers learn is through listening, watching and mimicking.

Garden center signage is great, but it isn't everything. What sets apart excellent garden centers is a friendly, knowledgable and approachable staff. Nothing kills a sale quicker than confusion and frustration by a customer. Having ample staff that wanders the retail floor to engage customers would be a huge step in our industry. We need to follow the examples of clothing retailers who overstaff their stores to help customers with a very personal purchase. Our flowers are a very personal purchase, too, and customers require a lot of hand holding at times. They are trusting and take staff recommendations for variety suggestions and home garden tips with great weight.

As for learning through watching and mimicking, I think garden centers have embraced the concept of holding free classes and seminars where customers can listen to greenhouse staff or outside experts speak on specific topics. The next step is trying to evolve these classes into a cooking-class style, where customers are learning and doing at the same time. If it's building combos, taking cuttings or creating wreaths, the more senses a customer can utilize in the learning process, the quicker and better that activity is learned.

Toddlers Don’t Understand Big Words

Telling my son that he infuriates me means nothing to him. However, he does understand when I tell him that what he is doing does not make Dad happy. Marketing to the masses is not the exception. Each of you will have Master Gardeners visit your garden center, and they just love to throw around botanical names of the fantastic specimens they just have to have and can’t believe that you don’t carry. But just because the true genus and species of coleus is *Solenostemon scutellarioides* doesn’t mean you should ever consider calling it such. While you may have some plant geeks who can’t wait to find out if the botanical world has re-classified bacopa again, the majority of your customers only know common names. DON’T confuse them with your signage. And don’t let your staff try to impress customers with their vast knowledge of botanical terms. Have them share explanations in a manner that customers can easily understand. We don’t need to send away confused customers who are concerned that their creeping phlox needs to see a doctor since it has a very “prostrate” habit.

Toddlers Have an Attention Span of a Fly

Our toy room floor at the end of each day is a prime example for our boy’s length of attention span. Kids blow through activities and toys faster than you can clean up the last project or game they were playing with. However, when they’re playing with a toy, building a project or watching TV, their attention is focused. Using this thought process, garden centers should not limit their displays to end caps alone. The more displays you can have, the better. Your customers’ short attention spans will lead them throughout your garden center following a series of displays, telling them what to purchase. You also need to make sure the displays carry clear messages that can be understood and processed quickly. Too much wording can clutter and distract from the intent of the display.

Toddlers Are Attracted to Bright Colors

Purple dinosaur, yellow sponge, blue rain. There is a reason why the savvy marketer didn’t make Barney grey, SpongeBob moss green, or Thomas rust brown. They knew that toddlers love bright and bold colors. The same can be said for adult consumers and colors. Make your displays and signage bold and bright, have them attract attention to say, “Here I am, I am important, read me, look at me, buy me.”

Toddlers Love New Stuff

At three, my son became a sucker for flashy advertising. Whether it was the commercial on TV or the ad insert in the paper, if he saw a new toy, he wanted it. The toys in our house are boring, but if we go to a friend’s house, all their toys are the best toys ever because they haven’t played with them before. I know a lot of garden centers are doing a good job creating endcaps and displays focusing on new products in the industry. This is a place in the garden center to where staff can easily point customers in order to see all the fun new products organized together.

One way garden centers can improve on this idea is to showcase the products that might not be new to the industry but are new to that garden center. We think if it’s old, it’s not new. Let’s say this is the first year you’re carrying cordyline. While cordyline has been a new fad for the past five years, there are a lot of customers who have never seen this upscale replacement for spike and fountain grass thrillers. Make sure they’re made well aware of this new product you’re carrying this year, and play up the “new” excitement.

The other idea is to showcase new colors in existing lines. For example, when all of your geraniums are

separated on the bench by color, look at raising the pots of the new color higher than the rest. Another option is to put them in the middle right underneath your sign for geraniums. On the signage note the new color below. Just as “SALE” sells, so does “NEW”—and the margins are a lot better on the latter.

In the end, treat your customer with respect and a kind smile, and just realize that while we all grow up and get wiser, we never lose that kid inside. **GP**



Nathan Lamkey, a sales representative for Ball Horticultural Company, is the proud father of Parks (4), Rowe (2) and Brooke (12 weeks).