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Our Bright Future is in Capable Hands

Bill McCurry



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I'd heard of the Young Retailer Award, but never invested the time to seek out these rising stars to inquire what they knew. I've missed a treasure trove of knowledge and ideas—along with bubbling enthusiasm!

Each of the three finalists used two words repeatedly: entertainment and excitement. That's how they see the future of retail. It's not the cheapest price or latest variety. It's to excite, entertain and inspire their customers.

Jenell Martin (Catalpa Grove Farm, Columbiana, Ohio) measures how many hurrying customers stop and say, "Wow!" "That's how I know I've entertained them," she explains. One of Jenell's priorities is to take Catalpa Grove Farms "beyond Memorial Day." She has multiple ideas to

bring in enthusiastic customers throughout the summer and fall. "It's all about listening. We're small enough we can listen to each customer and strive to give them what they want and beyond."

Being part of people's lives brings relationships beyond just business. Jenell speaks at local schools, does community hayrides in the fall and participates in the preschool parades. The farm has numerous animals that make it a favorite stopping place for parents out with their young children.

Jenell makes sure the nursery is a peaceful sanctuary so people can find ways "to get in the dirt and connect. There are lots of gardeners out there. They just don't know it yet."

Ryan Watkins (Brownswood Nursery, Johns Island, South Carolina) keeps a Mickey Mouse bobblehead to remind him and his team that experience, excitement and atmosphere are Disney trademarks. Ryan wants to create that same feeling for visitors to his nursery.

Kids are important to Ryan, personally and professionally. The nursery's website includes several pictures of his family. Ryan created a kids' program fashioned after the adult program so children can learn to grow in the earth. "Gardening is healthy. Our job is to encourage and inspire people to grow."

“You know the ultimate customer service?” Ryan asks. “It’s giving someone a hug. People who are hurting need our help. We have to listen and be there when they need us and in the way they need us. We’re human and must do business as humans.”

Valerie Nalls (Nalls Produce, Alexandria, Virginia) is constantly seeking help to do things she can’t. The store is expensively landlocked because metropolitan Washington, DC, is growing around it. Valerie is responsible for the redistribution of produce grown by others. She does Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) by selling the yields of cooperating farms. The best part she says, “It brings traffic to us every Friday and Saturday, guaranteed.”

When Valerie determined Nalls Produce needed to be active on Pinterest, she knew she didn’t have the time or aptitude to do that job personally. However, she knew a customer who showed great creativity with her pottery that she sold on-line. Valerie asked if the customer would handle the Pinterest needs of Nalls Produce. She was thrilled to be able to work at home and spends all her earnings on plants/produce with Valerie.

In a similar situation, Valerie knew she needed to keep the blog active. This is especially important, as the CSA program continues to grow. With 5,700 people on the mailing list, she felt someone out there must be able to blog. She sent out a special email blast with the subject line: “Interested in Blogging for Us?” Respondents were asked to submit a sample blog. Valerie says she “only” got a dozen qualified replies, “but I really only needed one.”

What this shows is while there’s great talent in garden centers world-wide, too few bosses or friends have taken the time to nominate someone for the Young Retailer Award or Young Grower Award, GrowerTalks’ sister program. These young, energetic thinkers deserve our recognition. More important, we in the “establishment” need to hear their fresh perspectives and approaches. They’re our future. They’ll help us grow so that future is successful. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.