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Safety, Efficiency or Sales?

Bill McCurry



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Would you risk 5% to 8% of your sales against the possibility of an armed robbery? Dale Buist (Countryside Greenhouse, Allendale, Michigan) has 650 parking spots, 300 employees and 24 cash registers. He's taken that risk.

Despite struggling to overcome undiagnosed dyslexia throughout his life, Dale has always taken chances. "If we had been educated then we would have known we would likely fail and wouldn't have started," he says. "We had a goal in 1982. We planned and worked hard with very little money."

Today's facility cost over \$14 million. Dale hopes to bring his other two growing facilities to this location, giving him 25 acres under one greenhouse complex.

Countryside moved to their current location in 2013. Although a man of faith, Dale was open spring Sundays at noon, allowing time for church. Later, he decided to close all day Sundays.

"To some it was a statement of faith, like Hobby Lobby or Chick-fil-A, but it had an amazing business payback. In our peak times, we start restocking at 4:00 a.m. and close at 9:00 p.m. Some employees work 50 to 90 hours a week. The employee response to 'spend Sundays with your family' was overwhelming. It's enabled us to hire great people who might otherwise have passed up a retail career."

This also may not be typical garden retail practice, but for a flat \$20, he delivers anything anywhere within 100 miles.

"No, we didn't have an MBA's advice. I met two sisters in the store who told me they drove 100 miles each way to get here. They came in separate vehicles because they each planned to buy a carload. What I heard was, 'We're limiting our purchases based on the size of our cars. We're limiting our time together by bringing two cars.'"

"When we started the \$20 delivery, they returned in one car and brought a friend. The next trip they brought two friends. Now I had four women having a 'retail experience' at Countryside. Shopping as a group they bought more than they would have individually. We charged each for delivery—so that's really \$80 to go a bit beyond our normal delivery zone. I hope we broke even on the delivery costs, but I know with just those four women, we sold thousands of dollars more than we otherwise would have."

Dale saw how much cash his people deposited in the bank three times a day. Located on a main highway, he knew stores with less volume had been victims of armed robberies. He worried about employee and customer safety,

while looking at the effort cash took to count, protect and deposit. He heard of Sweden becoming a cashless country and committed to going cash-free. Prominent signs are posted throughout the store and on his website. A few customers may miss the message, but Dale's convinced the bad guys see it and walk away.

He also strives to accelerate the cash register lines to move people through faster. He watched every check writer start the conversation with "What's today's date?" and then take about 90 seconds to write out a check while other customers fumed in the growing checkout line. Dale said, "No checks either." Furthermore, the county won't prosecute bad check writers "just for buying flowers." Dale believes, "By refusing checks, we encourage the few bad check writers to write bad checks somewhere else."

Countryside accepts only credit/debit cards. Their gift cards are available online or ideally customers will buy them from the dozens of area nonprofits, which sell them as fundraisers.

Dale estimates a possible 5% to 7% volume decrease this first year of his program. "It's a small price to pay for my employees' safety." **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.