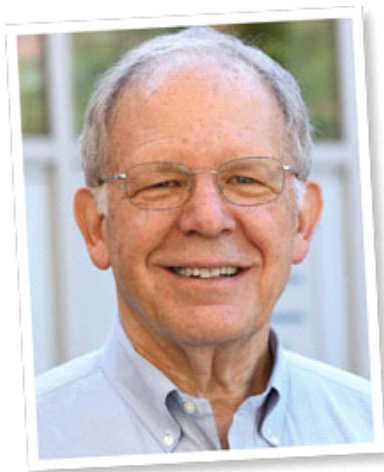


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Whose Opinion Matters to You?

Bill McCurry



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Forget the professional pundits. What your customers and your employees say about post-COVID is what's important. Only those people you count on should be listened to. Put your listening skills on full alert—not just your ears, but your ability to read body language and interpret new behavior patterns.

Most of us are burned out on customer surveys, unless they're for our store. Millions of dollars are invested in them, yet they can lead retailers astray. Observe how your customers shop. Listen to the questions they ask. Marcus Sheridan, author of "They Ask, You Answer," will show you countless examples where writing down the most common questions people ask will give you piles of usable data.

Asking customers if they still want curbside service won't be as meaningful as measuring whether curbside pickups are increasing or decreasing. Your

average employee will say dump them because most garden centers aren't staffed or designed for easy curbside pickup systems. But wait! Do we serve customers or staff? Let the customers vote with their dollars. Some people enjoy the curbside process. Mothers with small children are a great example of a demographic curbside has helped. When you ask moms, will they really want to give up this newfound ease of shopping at their garden center?

Watching your customers will tell you a lot about their attitude toward wearing masks, social distancing and other COVID safety factors. Regrettably, this issue has political baggage and our understanding of the disease has shifted over time. Don't debate it. Don't try to convert others to your way of thinking. Just sell them the plants they need in a manner where the customer and staff are comfortable.

Retaining employees through 2020-21 has been a challenge for most retailers. Many retail employees have asked, "Why do I want to keep doing this?" You can offer your team something very few others can—the pride of knowing they're part of the solution for cleaner air, healthier foods and better living. How many retail stores sell products with the benefits green goods have? "Purpose" is a very significant job reward.

Interview Tip #1: Just as Sheridan says to listen to the customers' questions, listen to your team and applicants. When a job applicant says, "I've always wanted to work in a garden shop," with a big smile, look them in the eye and ask, "What is it about our industry that makes you say that?" This question focuses on the industry. If the question were "Why do you say that?" it focuses on the interviewee in an almost accusatory fashion. "Why" and "you" close together in a sentence puts anyone on the defensive. Avoid those questions.

Interview Tip #2: After asking a question, stop talking. Most humans abhor silence. If you're quiet, they'll usually talk. "What else?" is a good technique to get the applicant to continue talking. Your goal is to get actionable information specific to the job applicant—or customer—you're dealing with. The more they talk about the issue, the more you learn and the better the decision you can make, whether it's hiring or providing a garden recommendation.

Depending on location, one aftermath of COVID may be the \$15 minimum wage is close to market rate. Fringe benefits may be more advantageous than a pay increase. Ask your CPA if the first \$5,250 of student loans you pay for employees can be tax free. For a 20-hour-week part-timer, that's more than an additional \$5/hour. This saves you on payroll taxes and the employee on Social Security and other payroll taxes, and you may be the only one in the area offering this. Everyone likes a tax advantaged paycheck.

We all have our favorite "during the pandemic ..." story. Make yours about how you used the lessons learned from your customers and employees to make your garden center more productive and fun. It's a silver lining to a very black cloud. **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.