

Features

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A Shop with Personality

Bill McCurry

When your local customer market is only a few thousand people, you have to go all out to create a destination store that brings people from hours away. Located in Ontario's Niagara Region, The Watering Can sits among 30 destination wineries. Operated by Lisa and Earl Lautenbach, it opened more than 25 years ago, started by Lisa's sister, Marja, who modeled the concept after European garden shops. Six days a week, visitors can enjoy a hot beverage or eat in the restaurant while enjoying the unique displays set in 30,000 square feet.

The Watering Can refers to itself as a "flower market." The first display rule is no straight lines of flowers. It's a maze where every turn presents another visual feast of color, texture and display.

Lisa holds herself and everyone else to those standards. "I won't accept what I've seen before. We must present plants and flowers with fun and creativity, not just beauty. Of course, we must sell things, too. I've had to say, 'That project is not there yet. Please redo it.' And it always comes back better."

Living the Vibe

There's no question Lisa is a "benevolent dictator" leading a very creative team who design everything from waterfalls to one-of-a-kind displays.

"Our team creates a vibe and the customers feel it," she says. "It's a wonderful atmosphere."

Lisa listens to her diverse staff, whose different tastes and passions represent future customers. Recent examples of this include branded t-shirts, cards and new pins that represent The Watering Can's iconic areas. These products were instigated and designed by the team who then recommends them to customers.

The "Joy of Discovery"

To the untrained eye, the store's eclectic fixtures may seem haphazard and disheveled. Joy of discovery is a critical impetus for customers returning to see what's new. As the display areas become more crowded, discipline ensures maximum use of space, while still allowing for the open areas and wandering aisles, emphasizing the "come back and discover what's down the wandering path" vibe.

Over the decades, customers have given The Watering Can old cars, pianos, organs, cupboards, appliances—even an airplane and a boat. Lisa realized customers were giving part of themselves when they contributed their family's heirlooms to be added to the retail floor.

"Customers may be emotionally attached to these items. We treat everyone with respect and are doubly respectful of those donating things with heavy emotional anchorage. We assure them that while we may be unable to use their

donation today, we're constantly refitting and redesigning the store displays."

The Watering Can is also known for its pastries and desserts—true works of art, pleasing to both eye and palate. After Marja passed away, her daughter asked her Aunt Lisa if she could bake and sell pastries.

"Food and drinks have a mind of their own these days" Lisa reflects. "It's not a significant money-maker by itself. The prices are reasonable, the quality is extremely high. Food service in the back requires customers to wander past all our offerings to get to it. Look at the shopping carts full of product waiting for the shoppers to finish eating. No question food service drives significant sales, while building loyal customer relationships we covet."

The 125-seat restaurant has potential overflow areas to seat another 150 patrons depending on season. The superb lunches and afternoon tea service allow customers, many of them women, to get together with friends. Before reaching the food area, they must wander past hundreds of items that seem to say, "Buy me and take me home."



Creating Customer Demand

Customers are invited to let loose with their design skills with a wide array of one-of-a-kind workshops. Classes are now taught in three different hoophouses, allowing for social distancing. Each house has a unique theme on the front and students are instructed to go to the Wine Barrel greenhouse or the Automobile Garage greenhouse. For pandemic distancing, tickets are sold for tables seating four so that attendees are working either close to those from their own "bubble group" or at a table by themselves. In 2019, over 16,000 students attended.



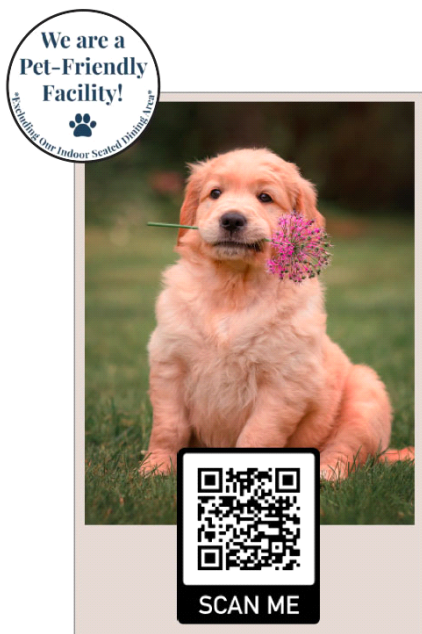
During the November-December 2021 season, four workshops a day were scheduled. Even with social distancing, 7,100 seats for the Christmas season workshops were sold out 31 hours after the postings. The shop is reaching maximum workshop attendance, with most workshops selling out within 48 hours of posting year-round.

Do-It-Yourself (DIY) kits have been extremely fast sellers, with supporting workshops both online and in person. Private workshops, with food and wine service for 12 or more, were popular pre-pandemic and will

likely resume post-COVID-19. They're a unique experience for learning to appreciate the shop's food and flowers. Lisa says, "We build customer loyalty one customer at a time."

One of Lisa's philosophies is: "Look for the helpers in your life." The Watering Can has 80 permanent employees, peaking at 125 in key seasons. COVID created additional positions to handle the sanitation and increased curbside and delivery work. Lisa believes, "The Watering Can will survive because we have a great team of helpers who make it happen."

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future stories. He is a Green Profit columnist and owner of the consulting firm McCurry Associates Inc. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.



Dog Life

Most customers enjoy shopping with a friend, a family member—or their dog. Discover the shop’s dog-friendly policy by checking out The Watering Can’s Instagram page @DogsOfTheWatering Can (click the QR code) as well as their Instagram and Facebook pages.

Giving Back

Each season, The Watering Can sells truckloads of cut Christmas trees, with all the proceeds going to Hospice Niagara, where Marja spent her last days. The family pays back by using the Christmas tree season to educate the community on what hospice does, while raising thousands of dollars to support its work.

Wilson!

One staff artist designed a line of greeting cards sold in the store with sketches of various scenes, like pianos with flower displays and Wilson the VW bus. Wilson is decorated like a 1970s “hippie bus” and displays a lot of

product. A “Name the Bus” contest let customers determine the name Wilson. The vehicle appears frequently in visitors’ selfies and social media posts.

But Wait, There’s More!

Stay tuned in 2022 to read more about how The Watering Can creates buzz that attracts customers from hundreds of miles away. Watch the pages of *Green Profit* next year for the rest of the story! **GP**