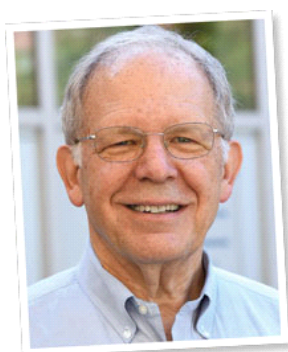


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## The Power of Listening

Bill McCurry



Bill McCurry

Garden center managers know it can be lonely at the top. There are unique industry issues that managers wish they could talk over with others who have overcome the same challenges. Happily, horticulture leaders are generally an open book, willingly sharing their experiences, frustrations and successes with their industry peers.

Listening can uncover innovative ideas or reinforce what you thought was the right approach. Listening to this year's three *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award finalists uncovered the industry tips you see below.

Sam Di Rito (Collier's Greenhouse and Garden Center—Jackson, Georgia) reminded me of the benefit of having outside experiences before joining the family business. College ROTC and time as a Navy officer taught Sam to quickly learn new things and make decisions.

From a young age, Sam was responsible for growing cucumbers. His grandmother put the proceeds from "his" cucumbers into a scholarship fund Sam used for college expenses. Collier's still has "College Cucumbers" where the proceeds go into annual \$1,000 scholarship awards for local high school seniors.

Sam agrees with pushing picture-heavy social media. "Collier's is a good hour's drive from Atlanta. The only way we can entice people to make that drive is frequently posting superb pictures of our finest products. Social media has replaced Grandma's telephone, but you must interact with it, just like a phone. Perpetual hold on a phone wouldn't work. On social media, a timely response is equally essential. Answer questions within 24 hours or, hopefully, sooner. A customer on hold feels neglected. Potential customers think unanswered questions show how much you really care about your customers."

Michael Fiore (Smith's Gardentown—Wichita Falls, Texas) is a fourth-generation retailer/grower who, after he finished school, went abroad for international experience. He learned about adversity when his international employer "fell apart," leaving Michael to think quickly and effectively about where to go and what to do. His mother was running the Texas garden center and needed help, so he returned home and "rediscovered what my grandfather loved about the business."

Michael calls himself the Chief Education Officer since marketing and social media are extremely critical for a garden center centrally isolated 150 miles from both Oklahoma City and Dallas. Michael believes it's critical that the industry regains the role of "influencer" in customers' minds.

"It's not always about pretty flowers. The most impactful posting was about Jeffery, the male goose that was lonely

and started protecting his reflection in the glass front door. He wouldn't let customers near that door." That TikTok video about Jeffery's troubles yielded millions of views, cementing Michaels' status as a TikTok influencer.

Emily Kellett (STUMP—Columbus, Ohio) was an art student at Columbus College of Art & Design working on AmericanHort's Shift Project in 2013-2014. AmericanHort dropped that program, but Emily took what she learned and opened STUMP as a houseplant and wares store in Columbus, the first of eventually 10 locations across four states. It was this geographic spread that made the concept of "hire slow, fire fast" a reality. "Hire slow" means to leave the position empty until you find the right person to fill it, rather than hiring the first warm body in the door. "Fire fast" means acknowledging a person isn't right for the job and quickly finding someone else who is. Emily is candid about their past hiring mistakes and hopes those listening to her experiences will be able to avoid the pain she went through.

What gems will you gather by listening to others? You can meet the three Young Retailer finalists at 8:00 p.m. Monday, July 17 at Gaswerks Bar & Grill in Columbus as part of Cultivate. See you there! **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 731-8389.*

## The Key to Learning is Listening

Attend one of these—or any other—industry events with the goal of listening, not talking:

July 15-18—Cultivate'23 (Columbus, Ohio)

August 8-10—The Garden Center Show (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

August 23-25—Farwest (Portland, Oregon)

September 25-28—The Garden Center Group Fall Event (Cincinnati, Ohio)