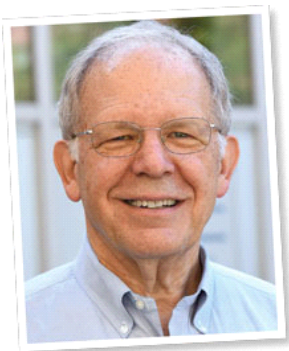


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# The Customer is (Not) Always Right

*Bill McCurry*



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One garden center educates their employees that the customer is not always right. It's heresy to contradict this age-old retailing principle.

Liz Lark-Riley at Mahoney's, the seven-store Massachusetts garden center chain, had a challenge: Teach 500 customer-facing employees about customer service ahead of the peak season crush. It's a critical aspect of Mahoney's success. Liz had to effectively teach this to new and returning team members.

I've watched, directed, made and bought sales training materials for decades. Liz's work is the best I've ever seen. She sets the tone easily and effectively, preparing every viewer to be a competent Mahoney's ambassador.

Tanner Jones, a Young Retailer Finalist and sharp contemporary businessman, told me about her video. "Liz totally changed my thinking about guarantees and how to address customers." So I called her for a personal and educational conversation.

Liz is big on the "Three E's—Empathy, Exception and Education." She believes people returning plants are generally sincere, frustrated, embarrassed and regretful about "killing" their plant. First and foremost, they need help, not hassle. They want empathy with someone on their side.

It made me reflect on my first "contrary" sales lesson. A mentor watched me handle a return and asked why I appeared to be adversarial to the customer. I'd been "trained" to convert "returns" into another sale. Instead he taught me how to approach the customer with a return, smiling while grabbing the Returns form. Greet the customer: "Looks like you have a return." Then ask their name and start filling out the Return slip, instantly signaling the customer will get a return without confrontation. They relax, dropping their fear of a fight. You ask, "What's causing this return?"

Notice the framing of this question. It's not, "Why do YOU want to return this?" Asking "why" and "you" in the same sentence is a personal accusation. "What's causing the return?" puts the focus on the return, not the customer, who now feels free to share their frustration and give you the opportunity to solve their original reason for buying the product. This means you can more easily replace it or sell them something different.

The advice sounded weird, but I nervously tried it—with my mentor looking over my shoulder! It worked marvelously well. The customer sees you're on their side, not trying to hassle them, and they share what they really need. This is just one form of showing empathy for how the customer may feel.

Liz's emphasis on Empathy recognizes a reality we don't talk about much—the guilt over plant death. We know many of our customers are passionate about their plants, yet we ignore their emotional feelings when they bring in a problem plant. We see it as a "transaction," while possibly they see it as a personal reflection on their gardening skills.

We've heard people say they have a black thumb, not a green one. This is self-defeating and contrary to building successful gardeners. We need to emotionally build them up to being successful plant parents or more routine plant owners.

Liz's Exception phrase is doing what's needed, sometimes giving the customer an exception to company policy: "Just this one time for you."

Education comes in when we teach the customer how to avoid the likely cause of what was ailing their plant.

[GO HERE](#) to watch Mahoney's video. Invest five minutes watching it: two minutes at 2:16 to understand Liz's new "Customers are always right" motto, then, three minutes at 17:37 to understand Liz's logic for returns.

Mahoney's management should be recognized and thanked for sharing this insightful video with the industry.

Whether you adopt the policies of Mahoney's isn't important; what is important is the perspective you'll use to get your customers back into successful growing. I guarantee you'll benefit from it. If not, give me a call/email/text and drinks are on me at the next industry event we're both attending—that's my guarantee. **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.*