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We’re Still in Good Hands

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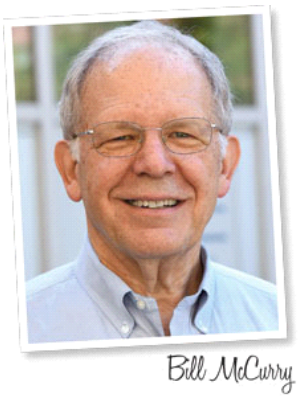

“I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words.”
—Greek poet Hesiod (circa 750–650 BCE)

Every older generation asks, “What’s the matter with kids today?” Each July, when we reflect on the finalists for the *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award, the answer is NOTHING! This year’s three finalists are setting even higher standards.

Tyler Cerbo of Cerbo’s Parsippany Greenhouse and Garden Center in Parsippany, New Jersey, has been running the family’s retail operations for 10 years. During this time, he’s grown retail sales at a 19% compounded annual growth rate (CAGR).

“Come in and swap a houseplant with someone!” Tyler started plant swaps on slow weekends in the off-season. It’s a minimal cost for the garden center, drives traffic (100-plus at each event) and builds customers’ appreciation of Cerbo’s. Tyler isn’t turned off to the fact some people are swapping plants without buying anything. “When they need plant food, pots and new plants, they’ll fondly remember us. It’s not about the immediate sale, but the long-term passion they’ll have for shopping with us.”

Tyler’s father often told him, “Take care of the community and the community will take care of you.” Besides “normal” things, like Little League sponsorship, Tyler supports Trees for Troops, which, with help from FedEx, delivers real Christmas trees to military families. Cerbo’s collects customer donations for the trees, which they then sell at cost. The biggest impact is their “Load the Truck” event. FedEx drops trailers at the store and volunteers come to physically load them. This has an impact on kids and their families because they’re giving more than a cash contribution. They’re physically helping to do something for someone else. It’s a community-wide “feel good” moment.

Maria Harford of Benken Garden Center and Florist in Cincinnati, Ohio, is another former part-time employee who’s now a garden center manager. Open year-round, Benken consistently reminds the community they’re a great place to spend an afternoon. Some days they distribute chalk for the kids—and their parents—to draw on the concrete floors. Scavenger hunts are fun, while encouraging customers to wander through the entire garden center. Maria said, “We don’t want people to buy and leave. We want them to hang around, experience the greenhouse joy and

think of us as someplace to go for a fun family time.”

Some fall weekends they provide free hot dogs. Maria realizes not every hot dog eater will buy something, but she focuses on the individuals and families who come out to visit and have fun. She knows the majority will become customers.

Benken has turned their seasonal space into meeting rooms for hire. Besides boosting cash flow during slower seasons, the people who are coming to these events may not have shopped there before. Thus, Benken is being paid to have new people visit. They donate the space for community nonprofits and still get the benefit of new people visiting the garden center.

Isabella “Iz” Paurazas is at Willow Greenhouse in Northville, Michigan. Her boss, Jamie Penn, said, “There is no task she considers beneath her.”
She tells her team, “I don’t see the point of faking any sort of interaction.” She explained. “I lead by example. I’m very open that I’ve made mistakes. There is nothing wrong with making mistakes ... I don’t like the term ‘leadership.’ In a way, we’re all equals.”

Iz works with local organizations to build food security for those in need by actively supporting local vegetable gardens. Concerned about carbon emissions, water use, supply chain impacts and electronic waste, she hesitates using AI.

Iz decided to sell tissue culture, which we know are priced substantially lower than finished plants. Her decision was insightful as overall sales continue climbing.

This year’s Young Retailer Award group is obviously continuing the positive trend toward more community involvement and stronger community relationships. **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) 731-8389.