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The Power of Authentic Connection

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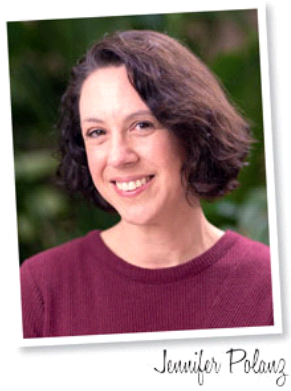

I've had a few experiences recently that really solidified for me the idea that independent retailers have a prime opportunity to make lasting, meaningful connections with their customers for greater long-term success.

Let's start with my visit to a cool little spot in Huron, Ohio (right around Cedar Point amusement park, if you've ever been there). Mark and Karen Langan reached out to me, inviting me to visit their operation, Mulberry Creek Herb Farm & Winery. I headed out there on a beautiful Friday afternoon in September, and found a local gem of a place run by wonderful people who've been in the horticulture industry their whole lives (they have a great horticulture love story, too, that begins with them meeting at the now closed Molbak's in Seattle).

What really stood out to me is the authentic connection they had with their customers, calling some by name, and easily talking and joking with them as they shopped and selected wine from the newest addition to the garden center, their son Ben's winery. You'll read more about them in an upcoming issue of *Green Profit*, but this visit is one that stood out to me on how a garden center can really create authentic connections that keep people coming back.

Of course, I'm thinking about connections more because that was the theme of this year's Garden Center Group Fall Event at the end of September in Cleveland. You'll also see more fall displays from the retail tour in an upcoming issue, but the keynote on the first day from actor, National Geographic explorer and storyteller Chris Bashinelli was a powerful message of the importance of personal connection. In today's impersonal, tech-driven world, people are looking for ways to connect in meaningful ways offline and independent retailers have an opportunity to meet customers here.

Something Chris said stuck with me: "Let's have the courage today to create that space where other people can feel like themselves in our presence."

Essentially, that's creating a sense of belonging so customers can connect with nature, with each other and with a better version of themselves, he said. That's powerful stuff. What does that look like in your business?

Why is it so important to connect? Because trust begins with connection. When I feel a connection with a local retailer, I trust their recommendations for plants and products, and for how to complete projects. I explored helping

employees and customers water more effectively to enhance their chances for success. Then Katie Elzer-Peters looks at strategies for selling more fertilizer to continue to expand those chances for success. Retailer Sarah Beach comes in with a guest column on how retailers can reach out into their communities to create those meaningful connections and help build loyalty.

I want to take a moment here, too, to thank our connections in the industry for sending out sample plants for us to try this spring and summer. There were a lot, and I'm afraid I'm going to miss someone by naming them all, but if you sent out a box, know that we see you and appreciate you, as well as the growers who did such a great job this year! I will call out Lloyd Traven at Peace Tree Farms for coordinating trial boxes for independent retailers so they can show off new stuff to their customers and get them excited. If you want to see what really wowed us editors this year, read our annual Stuff We Love feature. And I will say, this was only a partial list for me (even with my honorable mentions)—I had a LOT of stuff do really well this year, which I think speaks to the quality of the breeding happening now.

And, finally, one more way you can connect with your customers: through projects. My colleague Ellen Wells and I both sat in on a recent webinar that highlighted while Amazon reined supreme in one-off garden purchases, their market share dropped substantially when it came to projects, which accounts for 90% of the category's overall spending. Not only that, but project spending is three times higher in person versus online. Consider that as you connect and build trust with customers in 2027!

Here’s to making meaningful connections. **GP**