

Features

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Keeping Up With the Customer

Ellen C. Wells

For nine years now we've annually culled through stacks of nominees for the Green Profit/Red Fox Young Retailer Award. The qualifications and the accolades that follow them are stepped up a notch each year, too. This year's nominees have been outstanding—so much so that it was difficult to narrow the field down to just three. But we did it. This year, our finalists include two operation owners and a store manager whose boss cannot gush about him enough.

Speaking of our judges, our panel of retail experts covers the gamut of experience. They'll ask the hard-hitting questions of each finalist that will determine who goes home with the award. I have a feeling our judges will have some difficulty choosing a winner from our three worthy finalists. Our 2014 judges' panel includes:

- **Dale Bachman**—Chairman and CEO, Bachman's Inc.
- **Bill Calkins**—Business Manager—Independent Garden Centers, Ball Horticultural Company
- **Judy Sharpton**—Growing Places Marketing and Green Profit columnist
- **Matt Smith**—Winner of the 2013 Young Retailer Award

We'll announce the winner during Cultivate'14 in Columbus, Ohio, during the Unplugged event at the Park Street Cantina at 8:00 p.m. on Monday, July 14. The winner will also be featured in the September issue of *Green Profit*.

YRA Essay Question: Years go by. Your expenses go up. Customers, however, have different expectations for the products you sell. How does your garden center determine a strategy for covering these increasing costs over time while not alienating customers?



Karen Gardner

Age: 24

Title: Owner

Operation: Roses Inc. Green Country, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma

If someone would have told me four years ago, when I was a Studio Art major at New York University, that I would soon be running my own rose nursery business I would have scoffed, partially because I had never gardened in my life. The other reason being I was resolute in pursuing my “chosen path” in Manhattan. Life, however, has a funny way of redirecting the unwittingly lost.

At the ripe age of 21, after suffering a debilitating health condition, I returned home to the great, red-clay state of Oklahoma. As part of my recovery, I worked outdoors with a struggling small business owner who was looking for help maintaining his customers’ roses. It was then that I developed my passion for roses, and within three years I withdrew from NYU, purchased his nursery and garden service business, relocated it to a 7-acre farm in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, and opened my own entity, Roses Inc. Green Country (RIGC).

Niche industries, I’ve concluded, require one to become autodidactic. In addition to ardently pursuing the specifics of rose plant horticulture, upon which our nursery’s 4,000 potted rose bushes survive, I had to hone my skills in financial accounting, market research and, most importantly, the creation of a sustainable business culture. Borrowing generously from Bill Pollard’s “The Soul of the Firm”, RIGC—regardless of market fluctuations or any other uncontrollable factor—would remain firmly rooted, with integrity, in four core pillars: humility, servitude, diligence and the provision of unique, high-quality products. That, in combination with a detailed business model, is the framework upon which we base all of our decisions.

As an art major, I pulled inspiration from anything and everything. We target our demographic by supplementing market research with studying the vogue in fashion and fine and culinary arts. Always striving to better understand our customers’ expectations, we assemble study groups to ameliorate their online, in the field and retail site experiences. I personally interact with our “tweeps” on Twitter and carefully design, produce and mail a monthly e-newsletter providing tips, detailing the latest in gardening culture that serves my rose-growing community. This expands our customer reach and creates transparency that differentiates our nursery from big box competitors.

Keeping overhead noticeably low is also an underestimated facet of customer appreciation. When my fiancée and I were first dating, we agreed that regardless of where our careers take us, we would continue to enjoy a frugal and modest lifestyle. Customers know that our product mark-up is also our livelihood and they advocate with their wallets. If we boast of an overly luxurious retail atmosphere, what message does that convey to our customers about where their dollars are being spent?

We sell our products and services confidently based on MSRP (Manufacturer’s Suggested Retail Price) research with the understanding that profit margins assure sustainability. Our loyal customers not only want us to succeed, but also want to continue buying the products and services we offer. Anyone can scan barcodes with their smartphone, comparing in-store products to what’s available online; we have to ask ourselves, what’s the price of convenience? What can we offer that’s both utilitarian and sensually appealing, prompting

an in-store purchase? The answer is customer service. Our rose technicians, field crew, and administrative and nursery staff are formally trained to make plant selections easy and rewarding. If perchance they don't have an immediate answer to a question, they also know that finding the correct answer is more important than saving face. We address our customers by name, thank them with a handshake or maybe a free sample of fertilizer, and encourage them to contact us with any future questions. A computer simply can't do that.

Lastly, there needs to be a willingness to let go of what we cannot control, such as a customer's final decision to shop elsewhere. Responding to even immoderate expectations with humility, servitude, diligence and confidence allows us to build resilience and focus on the truly important: keeping our doors open by fostering meaningful relationships.



Debbie Foisey

Age: 33

Title: Owner

Operation: Deb's Greenhouse, Wildwood, Alberta, Canada

Deb's Greenhouse created a destination garden center.

As an independent grower/retailer, we have fun growing for both our retail and wholesale customers. Working in the most anticipated seasonal industry in Canada (except for hockey season), we're proud to sell happiness. Over the years, in spite of increasing costs, rather than alienating our customers, we've developed strategies to engage them. Our strategies include: a strong social media presence, providing memorable customer service, carrying exclusive products and implementing leading-edge marketing campaigns. We also understand the value of continuously educating our customers and ourselves.

Here at Deb's Greenhouse we do "dot com." Before customers arrive here they can find us online in a few different locations. A large percentage of our new customers are the coveted Generation Ys. With a dedicated Facebook campaign we connect and engage with our customers all year long. Social media is used to our greatest advantage to create anticipation and showcase our products. We offer free Wi-Fi so our visitors can share their onsite experience with friends and family while at the garden center.

The key to memorable customer service is enthusiasm, and at Deb's, this is where the magic happens. We know that exceptional, memorable customer service is the most valued quality for consumers. Our goals to engage and satisfy customers are well-rewarded with nearly 100% of guests making a purchase.

Having new and exclusive products is an important strategy. At Deb's Greenhouse we build our own line of exclusive wooden planters. Our guests know they can find new, interesting and different products here. Each year we trial new varieties and showcase these; our customers know they can find the latest and greatest plants here.

Marketing is the most important thing we do. As part of our marketing campaign we have our garden center and family featured by a professional photographer. These images go on posters, banners, mail outs, web

pages and vehicles. This presentation of advertising is a real head turner and we capture an audience that remembers us. Yearly, they feature our new product lines, from PanAmerican Seed's Cool Wave Pansy to this year's Sweetunia Johnny Flame from Dümmen. In-store signage is very important. We use signage to engage our guests, create conversation and, most importantly, we invite everybody to touch the plants. By featuring the benefits of the plants on our signage, it tells our customers how this plant will make their lives better.

I'm also very involved in growing our greenhouse industry. As manager of The Greenhouse Marketing Forum, I've created an energetic go-to place for horticultural professionals, encouraging them to share, learn and grow their businesses. I volunteer with our Provincial Greenhouse Association, recently becoming the first President to be younger than the Association itself. Continuing education, attending conferences, seminars, trade shows, networking with colleges and suppliers keeps us at the top.

With these strategies, we continually keep our customers engaged. Deb's Greenhouse is more than a garden center. I'm not just a greenhouse lady; I have become the greenhouse lady.



Miles Thompson

Age: 25

Title: Store manager, greenhouse production coordinator

Operation: Wallace's Garden Center, Bettendorf, Iowa

Maintaining customer loyalty is one of the biggest challenges for garden centers. As the economy changes, prices will fluctuate, and managers constantly worry that customers will buy less. While working at Wallace's Garden Center, I've learned a few strategies on how to keep the customers coming in, even if prices have risen.

People really do come see us at Wallace's because of our excellent service and expertise. The number one thing we strive to do is to make their shopping experience at the garden center the best in town. Our experts work hard to help our customers get the right product for their specific need—even if it means talking them out of something else. At Wallace's, we don't want to see people fail. That's the reason they come to see us. We have designers on staff for landscape design, outdoor room design and planting design for miniature gardens, houseplants and annual containers. Our customers are confident that we'll do our best to answer all their hard-to-answer questions.

A customer's experience at Wallace's Garden Center is usually fun and upbeat. Gardening and working in our yards is exciting, so your experience purchasing gardening products should reflect that. Plus, the employees at Wallace's like to laugh and have a good time. We strive to make shopping easy for our customers. When a customer has a handful of plants, we go and get them a cart. Maybe the cart is getting too full, so we run and get them a new cart and hold their other cart at our register all ready for checkout. Throughout the shopping experience, we're checking in and making sure they're finding everything without disturbing their independence. After checkout, we have carryouts on hand to walk them to their cars and we

try to leave an excellent impression of Wallace's. The experience should be easy and fun!

Can customer service be enough to keep our customers happy even if the prices increase? I believe that people are willing to come and spend extra at Wallace's because of the shopping experience and quality of the product, but that's not our only strategy. Repeat customers keep our business alive. We need local regulars to keep us afloat, so we focus on offering a little extra for these special customers.

We make sure that our loyal customers are the first to know about everything happening in our store. They learn about deals and sales through our newsletter and email blasts. Not only do we tell them about deals that save them money, but we also tell them what they should be doing in their yards. We inform them when the best time is to prune specific plants, when to protect plants from pests or when it's time to put down lawn fertilizer. Their experience continues outside of the store because we want to make sure they're taken care of.

We offer educational seminars throughout the year to help inform the customers on new garden products and ways to spruce up their landscapes, and we even bring in special guest speakers. We plan numerous community events for families to bring their children to and enjoy seasonal activities. They really enjoy gathering with others from the neighborhood and spending time simply enjoying the day.

Wallace's works very hard to offer products that are desirable with the best price, even if this means we have to lower our margin. Every season we cut the price on specific products to make sure we have the best price in town. This draws people in who are looking for a bargain. Once they're in our store we rely on our experts to give them the experience they'll never forget. Also, giving deals and bargains for both new and loyal customers will encourage them to buy that patio set they've been eyeballing or splurge on a nice piece of pottery filled with annual flowers.

Each and every day is an experience and I'm always learning. I don't think there's been a day I haven't learned something new. The garden center business is a rollercoaster ride that has sudden turns—sometimes turns that are really rough, such as rising prices. With hard work and motivation anything can work out as long as you focus on your customers' needs and love what you're doing. **GP**