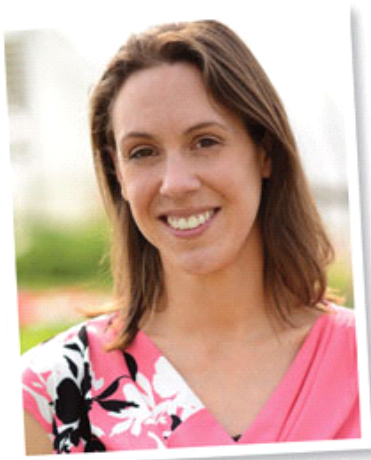


Columns

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The Dangers of Playing It Safe

Jennifer Polanz



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We all know retail is a risk. I don't think anyone ever said to themselves, "I'm going to play it safe and open up a retail business." It's a big investment, a lot of work and hopefully in the end, some payoff—both monetarily and personally.

The retail environment is constantly changing and it seems that risk continues to grow by the minute. We've seen news of countless small garden retailers closing their doors, but now we're seeing closings from the big guys, too. Recent news of longtime retail giant Macy's closing 100 stores this year sent shockwaves through the mainstream media. What's to blame? Lagging holiday sales are only a symptom of a larger problem. In those hand-wringing news reports came the only bright spot: e-commerce sales were up by double-digit percentages, according to

Forbes.

Perhaps another victim of the big A? Or perhaps just a retailer that didn't see the changes in consumer buying behavior fast enough? But wait, there's more. Mallrats everywhere mourned as Aeropostale shuttered all but 229 stores as it went through bankruptcy proceedings last year and The Limited abruptly closed all its 250 stores in January. As for Sears and Kmart, they are seemingly hanging on, though Kmart closed more than 120 locations in 2016 and the company is set to close 150 more Sears and Kmart stores in 2017. Plus, Sears just sold its Craftsman brand to help staunch the bleeding.

It's sad to see, though. I watched a documentary a while back about Sears, Roebuck & Co., a company that, for decades, people trusted for their most important life purchases—everything from wedding rings to houses (yes, Sears sold houses). There are probably a billion reasons why it happened, but in the end, Sears lost its relevancy to its customers. There are a lot of other places to shop and Sears stopped convincing customers they were the best option.

In Kmart's case, Walmart and Target came along and did general retailing better in price and trendiness, respectively. We've watched these changes happen in every corner of retail, from hardware to electronics to books and beyond.

Through all this, small and medium-sized independent retailers have tried to find their place among the chains, some succeeding rather well. Why? They've continued to be relevant to a changing customer base. Fortunately for our industry, we trade in peace and solace, as long as we sell it right. But it's not without its own special risks.

How do we remain relevant? By consistently understanding how our products impact customers. Ellen C. Wells takes a look at containers that don't just look pretty, but improve your customers' lives with their functionality. This year, don't just sell pots—sell a better way to garden. We give you a rundown of products that can help vertical gardening sales, since we're starting to see more interest in that trend.

You may not remember what it was like to struggle with your horticulture knowledge, but your customers are living it right now. Changing how you talk to them about plants and accessories might just be the shift you need to reduce their risk aversion to green industry products and cultivate a customer for life. Columnist Bill McCurry also cautions against making assumptions when communicating with customers.

Change is inevitable and it's necessary. Watch your customers carefully. The cues will be there; it's just a matter of reading them before it's too late. **GP**