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It's Not Apathy—It's Unprofessionalism

Bill McCurry



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He's high income, senior management in a large organization. He grew up working in small businesses. His current customers are small businesses. He patronizes local retailers. One beautiful Saturday morning, his lawn needed cutting. "Today's the day," he thought, planning to pay no more than \$4,000 for a new, fully-equipped riding mower.

Ready to buy, he went to his favorite local garden center. Like most Saturday mornings, it was busy. He looked at the mowers and was ready to ride one out, but nobody approached him. Finally, he asked a passing clerk if someone could help him. "You'll have to wait at least 15 minutes for George to be free. Or come back on Monday when we have more people here who know about mowers." The clerk kept walking and our shopper started walking—to his car.

Knowing my relationship with Green Profit, Mark called. "Tell your readers," he said, "It wasn't apathy on the part of the clerk that chased me away. It was the lack of professionalism." Then the could-have-been customer asked me these questions:

1. Don't people understand when they say, "You'll have to..." our natural reaction is "I don't have to and I'll prove it!"? Why not say, "If you're able to wait for George he's the most knowledgeable person about big mowers. You'll appreciate his expertise and he'll make sure you get exactly what you need. Can I tell him you're waiting?" That's an invitation to stick around rather than a challenge to leave.
2. If a retailer has six riding mowers in stock it represents significant inventory investment, right? Then why does a large garden center only have one "George" who can sell big mowers? Are the other salespeople idiots or does George hoard the information for lifetime job security? "A customer doesn't want to buy such an expensive product where only one guy in the whole place understands it. What if there's a problem downstream and George isn't working that day?"
3. "Why didn't they have running video displays explaining the benefits and differences between the various pieces of equipment?" Mark felt there were myriad videos on various manufacturer sites—plus YouTube—

that could keep the customers entertained and attuned to the different accessories and benefits of various models while waiting. Mark said if he could have benefited from the 15-minute wait for George, he would have stayed. He wasn't going to stand around watching other people shop.

4. More mower-knowledgeable sales people will be on duty Monday? Is that work schedule based on customer need or staff convenience?

Saturday mornings are hectic in most garden centers. That's when we have the most customers, which, unfortunately, means that's when we make the most number of impressions. Other than Mark's suggestions, what can you do to ensure customers don't walk out and tell all their friends your garden center was "unprofessional" and unworthy of repeat visits? Consider role-playing with your team about different ways to ask a customer to wait. Train your salespeople how/when to wait on multiple customers at once. Check your bottlenecks to help customers move through faster.

The rest of the story: Mark went home and fired up his 15-year-old mower. Thirty minutes later, a belt broke. Muttering, he headed back to the same garden center, which wasn't as busy. The person who helped him was the same clerk who told him to wait. This time he took the broken belt, went in the back room and immediately returned with a replacement. No recognition of Mark's prior visit. I asked if he would have bought a new mower on the second trip. "I wasn't given the opportunity," Mark said.

Don't you wonder if that garden center owner is frustrated with his mower sales? **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) 688-1169.