

Columns

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The Extras

Ellen C. Wells



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As happens with a vibrant interview subject and an endless amount of interview time, my conversation with this year's *Green Profit* Dümmer Orange Young Retailer Award winner Andrea Snelgrove seemed more like an easy chat over coffee than a journalistic enterprise. It also produced way more great Q&A content than we could fit within the allotted space for this month's cover story.

Thankfully I'm given a bit of room back here to do with as I see fit. This month that would be to share some more of Andrea's thoughts on what makes going to work each day seem like not working at all. For Andrea it's more like showing up to help, not just her customers but other local businesses. When you're in a work environment that commits to each and every person in the community, how could that ever be called a

boring ol' job?

When discussing the annual community-wide holiday open house weekend, I asked if the participating businesses were encouraged to cross promote each other. Andrea's answer was a resounding "Yes!" And not just for that weekend, apparently. The Lexington business community is a tight but friendly bunch that often makes referrals within the group. "If we don't have something I'll tell a customer the florist has it right up the road," Andrea explained. The cooperation goes beyond cross promotion and into that sticky realm of figuring out what products to sell. "I have businesses calling me saying, 'We saw Bridgewater Candles at market but we know you sell them. Is it okay with you if we sell them, too?' It's to make sure we keep it different even within the same category." Rather than pitting one business against the other, the cooperation helps both the businesses and the people who shop them.

Cooperation isn't restricted to the local business network. It takes a healthy, cooperative relationship between a business and a customer to truly be successful. "I said we're known for workshops and events, but we're also known for our great customer service," Andrea wanted to be sure to mention. "Without great customer service we couldn't have workshops that encourage people. We're here to help and educate them on each individual plant and how to grow them."

Helping and educating is one thing. Making it a pleasant experience is something else altogether. I'm reminded of a recent not-too-pleasant encounter I had with my cable and internet provider. Did they (yes, they—it took four people to figure out the problem) help me? Yes. Did they educate me? Kinda sorta, yes. Did I enjoy the experience? Nope, not at all. Andrea reminds us that it takes more than pretty flowers to bring customers into your store. "Just because we look pretty doesn't mean customers want to come see us," she said. "Your personality has to be as beautiful as your garden center." How are the personalities at your garden center looking these days?

Lastly, I asked Andrea what her favorite flower is. "Red hot poker," she said, "just because I have a story." Apparently when she was a little girl her green-thumbed mom would tell her not to touch red hot poker because it was hot. "And they're not!" Andrea said, laughing. "They're just so cool! I have seven of them in my yard."

I include that last bit about Andrea's favorite plant not as an example of customer service or community connections, but to show you the power of memory, family and storytelling. Red hot poker isn't the latest and greatest plant, and you'll likely never have a rush on it. But it's one that has a special place in Andrea's memory—and that's why she grows it. What are your customers' favorite flowers? More importantly, why? Asking the "why" goes a long way in creating that beautiful personality. **GP**