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And What an Experience it Was!

Bill McCurry



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Customer experience is an overused term—until you receive it beyond your expectation. For decades I've dreaded heading to the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. Jammed into tight exhibition halls with 170,000 of my closest friends + paying \$350 for a \$99 hotel room = Not a happy start to January.

My 2019 New Year's resolution was to attend MANTS (Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show) instead of CES. I'd heard so much about MANTS that I had to experience it. If I'd known how uplifting MANTS is, I'd have dumped the Vegas show years ago.

What made MANTS such a contrast to CES? Unlike Vegas, those in Baltimore's hospitality industry (restaurant and hotel staffs, taxi/Uber drivers, etc.) really seemed to care and wanted to be helpful. The below-freezing winds weren't welcoming, but the convention center has enclosed and

heated walkways connecting to some hotels.

MANTS is called "The Masterpiece of Trade Shows" with good reason. The show team was professional, yet welcoming. The most stupid questions were always answered in a way that I felt cared for and respected, as opposed to the CES staff's "I could care less" demeanor. (Which response best reflects your garden center?)

Also, the MANTS atmosphere was humane. In the cavernous Vegas trade show, there are few places to sit or talk with vendors or friends. MANTS, however, made a conscious decision NOT to rent out every square foot of space. Yes, MANTS has a waiting list. Many exhibitors want more space, but MANTS won't relinquish casual "social areas" where benches, tables and chairs are arranged so real human interchange can happen. MANTS made a conscious decision not to maximize income, instead creating an environment conducive to conducting business and establishing human connections. A significant reason retailers attend trade shows is to network with old/new connections; the MANTS spaces facilitate that.

MANTS is a unique organization sponsored by the Nursery Associations of Virginia, Maryland and West Virginia. The first show was in 1971, almost 50 years ago. Real people from the horticultural industry make up their board of directors. It has family roots. The late Carville M. Akehurst was one of the founders. Today, his daughter, Vanessa A. Finney, is the executive vice president. Is it the family culture that emphasizes experience over exhibit rental income?

Our industry is also fortunate to have the August IGC (Independent Garden Center) show in Chicago. Jeff and Cheryl Morey carry on a family tradition. Jeff's dad Dick started Nursery Retailer magazine, now called IGC Magazine. Jeff and Cheryl continue the publishing tradition, plus launched the IGC show in 2007. They connected with a deep need for a national show recognizing the importance of independent garden centers. Their vision was to create a more experiential and less impersonal, over-crowded trade show designed solely for independent garden retailers.

Understanding the need for retailer-to-retailer interaction, IGC features "shop talk," which are moderated, open-forum discussions. The IGC Concert and Party caps the experience. This year, it's Wednesday after the trade show so attendees and exhibitors can grab munchies, adult beverages and hear the great sounds of a big-name classic rock band for free. It's all part of the experience.

Our industry has trade shows that understand it's more than cramming exhibitors inside four walls. The Millennial gurus say younger people want experiences—what are you doing to make your garden center stand out? Anyone having concerts in their display gardens? Social areas where people can meet and talk, possibly with complimentary coffee? Maybe your experience is partially virtual with garden pictures shared online or real pictures on a customer wall of fame? One major garden center maintains an area called the "husband's parking lot"—coffee and big screen sports programming so they can chill while their wives shop.

Get your team together today for a brainstorming session. Have them describe your store experience. Make your store an experience customers want to repeat. **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.