

Features

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You're Better Than Amazon

Ellen C. Wells

At first, Amazon was on your bookshelf. Then they went for your e-reader. And out of nowhere they took over your whole house, from toilet paper at the push of a Dash Button and 2-hour grocery delivery to same-day delivery of a six-channel speaker splitter. Amazon's ever-attentive Alexa is not only awaiting your next order from your counter top, but she's also on your phone and in your car. And if Jeff Bezos has his way, Amazon will soon be delivering straight into your fridge. Maybe you should convert your doggie door into an Amazon drone door. Oh, did I forget to mention Amazon's seriously good TV shows and movies?

With all of that going on, how can you even think you can compete with the behemoth that is Amazon? As of this writing, everything that goes into making Amazon amazin'—artificial intelligence—hasn't yet overtaken our own capacity for emotional intelligence. We sense, we connect and we share. So, when it comes to being better than Amazon, we don't try to beat them at their own game. Instead, we play up what makes us human—the human touch.

Making Space

Creating connections can be as simple as offering a space to learn and create. In garden center terms, that could be a potting bench, like the one set up at Greengate Garden Centres in Calgary, Alberta. Greengoods Supervisor Kristen Busse says they've had a bench in operation for a number of years. They've tried numerous strategies over the years to set themselves apart, from a landscape design service to tree and shrub planting services and house calls. This potting bench, Kristen says, sees activity all year round, not just during peak spring sales times.

Anyone can use the potting bench and the supplies, which include free soils and slow-release fertilizers. Customers pay for the plants and containers they'll plant into, and they can either plant themselves, ask for staff assistance or have staff do the potting for them.

"The owners have figured it's a good seller," Kristen says. "It brings people back, gets people talking. The younger generation likes to get their hands dirty and like to be taught how to put things together ... so I think having that private one-on-one attention probably covers the cost of the soil." The human connection? The staff love to assist customers at the potting bench. "Our returning seasonal staff request to work in that section," Kristen says. "It gets to be a little competitive—but in a good way!"

What's On The Bench?

Planting instructions

Several types of soils and charcoal

Decorative rocks and sand

Adult- and child-sized tools

Fertilizers, moisture meters and glass terrariums nearby for add-on sales.

Pictured: The potting bench at Greengate Garden Centres sees a lot of action all year long.



Custom Creation

You've got a gal who does your hair. She knows how you like it, tells you the truth about how it looks. You've got a dog walker who, quite frankly, can get your dog to fetch better than you can. Don't your decorative containers deserve the same special attention?

Will Heeman at Heeman's Garden Centre and Strawberry Farm in London, Ontario, believes so. "Everyone has a guy or a gal for something, there's that personal connection," Will explained. "For our customers, they can book an appointment to have a container consultation." Customers drop off the containers at the end of the season, build next year's designs with a consultant and pick up the finished product by the end of the following May.

During the consultation, customers peruse "look books" for either pre-priced designs or can pick and choose their plants. During the winter, the customers' pots are directly planted with the chosen designs and then grown and maintained onsite. Thanks to the miracle of barcodes and computer software, customer orders are ready for pick up at their convenience—in their own pots and with the plants they chose during the consultation. "It works well for people who want to feel [their containers] are all taken care of," says Will. That's the human touch—with a little help from technology.



Will points out there are three additional benefits of their winter container consultation service:

Pictured: Customized containers are Heeman's way of providing that human touch.

Reduced plastic use: Containers are directly planted, so they're not selling customers plastic pots year after year.

Job creation: The service requires two full-time employees during the employment gap between Christmas and March. That is key in keeping a quality staff on board year round.

Big box protection: Creating custom containers in customer pots ready for pick up when the customer wants it—logistically that is something big box suppliers could not replicate. This gives an independent garden center a niche that they can own.

Does it work? With about 484 customers with 2,368 containers participating in the service in its 19th year, I'd say it does.

Expertise and the Extra Mile

"That's such a great example of going the extra mile," says Elnian Gilbert, a trainer with customer service and leadership training consultancy ZingTrain. A former Zingerman's Mail Order employee herself, Elnian knows what it takes to provide great customer service—the human touch.

"The thing that really sets apart great independent garden centers is the expertise, the really knowledgeable people who are genuinely enthusiastic about sharing that knowledge," Elnian explains. "For the most part they manage to come from a place that isn't lecturing or 'you should know this already.' They have a lot of empathy and understanding and want to get other people excited and enthusiastic about what makes them really eager."

One of the issues she encounters with her seminar attendees and private retail clients is a hesitancy around upselling. Staff and garden centers may shy away from planting, custom potting or house call services because they don't want to be pushy or focus on the sale. Elnian's advice in a nutshell essentially is get over it. "Upselling is actually offering great customer service," she explains, "because you are adding your expertise. 'I see you're putting these different plants together, did you ever think about adding this?' It's coming from a place of enthusiasm."

Win at your own game and put the behemoth in its place. Amazon's algorithms have a long way to go before achieving what you do best—empathizing, understanding and delivering great customer service with enthusiasm.

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Catch Her at Cultivate

Elnian Gilbert will be presenting the workshop, "The Art of Giving Great Customer Service," from 1 to 5 p.m. Monday, July 15 at Cultivate in Columbus, Ohio. Elnian will teach you the steps to giving great service and how to effectively handle customer complaints. You'll leave with a plan to create a culture of great service in your garden center. www.cultivate19.org/experiences.