

Cover Story

6/1/2020

Retail in the Time of COVID-19

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This year's Young Retailer Award nominees showed they're up to the task when it comes to just about anything, including pivoting the business during a

challenging pandemic.

In normal times, we require quite a lot from our *Green Profit*/RBI Young Retailer Award nominees. We ask them to pen a thoughtful essay on an industry topic of our choice to be submitted by mid-April. Then they must coordinate with our four judges to sit for phone interviews to be completed by June 1. This year we asked them to do all of this in the midst of a global pandemic that was drastically changing their business models on the fly.

Of course, each of our nominees came through (on deadline, I might add) with their essays and they showed why they're each a vital part of their respective businesses. Each year, I'm in awe of the work our young retailers are doing and this year is no exception.

I want to thank them and our judges for their dedication during such a challenging time. We appreciate your hard work to continue this awards program even in the face of adversity. And though we cannot meet face-to-face in Columbus to celebrate the way we normally do at Cultivate, we will find a way to make this year just as special as all the others.

Q: What can retailers do to strengthen their businesses to better withstand the impacts of major events like the COVID-19 pandemic?



Mickey Clickner

Title: *Bedding Department Manager*

Age: 34

Operation: *Tallahassee Nurseries—Tallahassee, Florida*

Today is the first weekend of April and my local community, along with the entire state, has just undergone a governor-mandated “Shelter In Place” order that’ll last for the next 30 days. This morning, I grabbed groceries from the store that was unquestionably busy for 9:00 a.m. Many aisles felt unwelcoming as the shelves were still void of products. Passing someone in the aisle was done quickly and with an uneasy sense of precaution. As I checked out, a pane of clear plexiglass separated the cashier and me. This

was not how anyone thought shopping in public would be conducted a month ago. And yet quickly, all these once off-putting and extravagant measures are now a part of a whole new normalcy.

With the new mandate, I wonder if the garden center I work for will be busy. Never in the nine-and-a-half years I’ve been there would I’ve ever considered a sunny Saturday in April to be anything short of controlled chaos. But we’re fortunate to be open. We wouldn’t be if it weren’t for the tireless dedication of everyone on staff and with the help of one peculiar word: “essential.” My nursery, like other physical retail spaces across the nation, has been forced to adapt to a rapidly fluctuating environment. I’d like to discuss some of the steps and measures we’ve taken to continue to support our community and staff. Let’s start off with what’s at the heart of any business: its employees.

A few weeks ago, our garden center found out that we were named No. 1 on Southern Living’s list of top garden centers across the southeast. Immediately, excitement flooded the nursery. An invigorated sense of pride led the charge into what’s always a busy, yet exhilarating, spring. But in one sweeping moment that raced across the world, none of that mattered. Sales goals forgotten. Racks of plants cancelled.

Now, three weeks later, we’re still open for business and it’s become clear maintaining the well-being and safety of each employee is the only way we move forward. With personal and professional lives both under strain, giving someone space both physically and mentally is absolutely critical. Taking a moment to acknowledge someone for a great effort or lending an open ear now goes even further. Opening discussions to all employees for new ideas has been paramount for adapting quickly. It’s been about keeping open and clear communication through each inevitable development. At the heart of the matter, it’s letting everyone know that they are still an important, valued member of our team whose well-being comes before anything else. These components of employee safety shed light to the next important step in our journey forward: creating a safe and healthy atmosphere in everything we do.

Operating as we knew it was no longer acceptable and even more, a failure to quickly face our current needs would endanger the health of each person at the nursery. Our garden center has 13 acres of space, which can give a false sense of effortless security. A part of our decision to move forward came with the help of our city commissioners. Looking out for what’s best for our staff, our business and our community, 6-ft. distancing regulations were mandated not only for customers, but between employees as well. We each wear a sticker on our shirt that reads “6’ Please” to remind ourselves and the public that we value personal safety. We reduced hours customers are allowed to shop to minimize the amount of interactions between staff and the public, as well as to allow more time with fewer customers around to restock and clean. Dropping cash and check transactions was an easy strategy to minimize contact points. Blocking off half of our parking spaces limited the foot traffic in the store, but also provided each customer more space to load their items while keeping a safe distance from other patrons. Lines have been painted on the cement near the cashier’s desk indicating how to safely space out the line. However, as prudent as these steps were, they’re ultimately just a superficial solution to a much more serious reality. If we’re looking to keep

people safe, it's going to require customers remaining at home safely shopping at a distance, which brings me to my final topic: distance shopping.

Our nursery, like many others, relies on the experience of physically shopping at our stores. People can take in all the beautiful colors, run into friends and neighbors, and oftentimes experience the joyful spontaneity of finding something that you hadn't intended to, but now absolutely must have. These are just some of the wonderful experiences possible while shopping at a garden center, but what do we do when all of that is taken away? Making the plunge to go online is a scary thought, but now, more than ever, that need stares us in the face. Capturing all our beautiful color into a digital database or catalog allows customers the opportunity to still see the inventory we're so proud to provide. By creating content through blogs and videos, we can still excite, inform and engage our followers. Frequent updates on social media, digital tours through the nursery and newsletters are even more ways to get eyes on what we provide to the community. Setting up delivery services, as well as a quick-and-easy curbside pick-up are nothing short of vital. Back in store, it's all about phone conversations and messages through email and social media. That one interaction now through a phone or a computer holds a much bigger weight. The principles of what we were doing each and every day are still the same, but the way in which we express them must change.

Having all the right answers in this new unpredictable environment is an impossible ambition. What prepares an individual, a business and an industry for tumultuous times is acknowledgment of the situation at hand, determining what your values are for the future and an openness to execute change. We must look to others for help and to share our experiences and ideas in order to strengthen our collective resilience. Our future is bright.

So for now, we're open—open to helping someone have a breath of fresh air, to relax with a rekindled appreciation for what we have in our lives. Open to exercise a need to reconnect to ourselves and the world around us.

Q: What can retailers do to strengthen their businesses to better withstand the impacts of major events like the COVID-19 pandemic?



Kimberly Gliha Mullen

Age: 34

Title: Co-owner

Operation: *The Garden Barn Nursery & Landscape, Vernon, Connecticut*

First and foremost, I would like to introduce myself and my company. My name is Kimberly Gliha Mullen, co-owner of the Garden Barn Nursery and Landscape in Vernon, Connecticut. The Garden Barn is a retail garden center that was purchased by my parents in 1981 and it has evolved dramatically in the last 39 years of business. My brother Shawn and I took over ownership of the business in January of 2018. The company sits on a sprawling 13-acre property with 8 acres of retail shopping space.

Being a part of the garden center industry, our family has always adapted to the many trials and tribulations we face each year. We are used to dealing with the inconsistency of Mother Nature that could make or break our busy season. We have had to adapt in order to keep our inventory alive and saleable to ensure that our customers receive the quality that we have always worked so hard to provide. We have adapted to labor turnover and so many other things over the years with the changes in demand. Adaptation in all industries is key, however, I think it is even more so in relation to agriculture.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has taught me more about myself, our company, our employees and our

consumers in only a few short (yet very long) weeks. COVID-19 has shown that a rapid change to our protocols is paramount and that the health and safety of our customers and employees must be the main priority. The circumstances of the current situation in our community and all over the world forced us to reflect on what we as a family and as a company should do in order to get our community to take the issues at hand seriously. We came to a decision to shut down retail operations for one week in order to come up with a safer and more efficient strategy to better serve our customers. We have implemented ways to require that our customers and staff respect and adhere to new protocols with great intensity, which has made us think outside of the box more than ever. Upon re-opening, there was no advertisement to the public in order to avoid high levels of traffic and we have been controlling the traffic flow by allowing slotted appointment times, FaceTime tours, using our outside cash registers and allowing only outdoor shopping.

It has been paramount for us to pay attention to news updates and how the crisis is affecting consumers and be prepared to change immediately. We adopted all safety measures required by our state, disinfecting all areas, wearing masks and gloves, and using tape to line the floors to remind customers to adhere to the 6-ft. social distancing rule. We have created a fluent curbside pick-up and small item, non-contact delivery service on top of our regular bulk material and plant material delivery options. The importance of our website had increased exponentially overnight as well—we have spent countless hours updating the website to provide our customers with our current inventory of all of the categories we sell. We had always wanted to provide all of this newly added information, however, we always made excuses and never made the time. We created an online order form on our website for customers to use to reduce the number of incoming phone calls. The website also includes endless photos to visually see the plants and products before they place an order. We have been using our social media accounts to give updates and post photos for customers to see our nursery stock and new items.

Communication between us as owners—owner to staff, staff to staff and staff to customer—has become key. As owners, we have had to plan as a team on how we were going to proceed each minute, each hour and each day. We then had to relay all of these procedures and changes to our staff who would in turn share with our customers. We have had to think and listen to what our consumers are asking for and buying. To keep spending at a minimum, it is imperative to focus on buying only those products. It has been vital to stay informed on the funds available from the federal and state governments, and our current lending office to be sure we can pay our vendors as much as we possibly can each week. During this pandemic it has also been necessary to talk as an industry. This communication with your vendors and sales representatives, other garden centers both bigger and smaller, and landscape companies will help provide with other thoughts to help everyone carry on as well as they possibly can.

After experiencing the repercussions of COVID-19, it is apparent that a company must learn to adapt and reform its normal procedures overnight if needed, or in some cases three times a day, in order to remain successful and serve its customers during a time of crisis. It is important to set a good example for staff members and the local community in order to keep those around us safe.

In conclusion, by thinking hard and fast, staying positive, working together as a team and carrying the willingness to change, I feel that our company and staff will only come out stronger in the end. As one of the owners, in any situation that mirrors the one we are living in today, my main concern will always consider the health of my employees, my customers and my family first. At the end of the day we must remember that we truly are “all in this together,” and god willing, may the world never experience a time like this again.

Q: What can retailers do to strengthen their businesses to better withstand the impacts of major events like the COVID-19 pandemic?



Lindsay Squires Chrisp

Age: 34

Title: *Community Development Manager & Events Coordinator*

Operation: *Tagawa Gardens—Centennial, Colorado*

A lone light illuminated the keyboard, my hands held taut above its letters. I stared through the office doorway into the greenhouse breakroom, noting the worn concrete where hundreds of staff had left their footsteps over the decades.

“Dear Tagawa Team, today has been an unprecedented day in the life of our state,” I began, tears spilling down my cheeks. “This reality sends across all our hearts and minds thoughts, questions and feelings that we

could not have begun to imagine even a few short weeks ago.”

A year that began with heartening increases in sales, average ticket and customer count was suddenly suspended within the void of an expanding unknown. As a farmer’s daughter, I viscerally understood the fragility of a live plant crop, but this springtime liability was different: COVID-19 was an invisible, indiscriminate force affecting every dimension of society, economy, community and family. Seven years earlier, when I first walked through the door of Tagawa Gardens in Centennial, Colorado, my heart was destined to be on the line for this place and its people. Just over a year since becoming a new manager, we were now navigating a global pandemic. We had already postponed our community educational programs and temporarily closed our retail store, but a statewide stay-at-home order soon proved that our spring reality had inalterably changed. Work and life work were held by tenuous threads. The past offered no direction; the future provided no coordinates. The uncertainty of the present moment became the only way forward.

Through the sudden adversity of COVID-19, we pivoted toward our bewildered community as an essential business, helping them from a safe social distance to do what we still could do: grow. In a matter of days, Tagawa Gardens and many other independent garden retailers developed services that we had known for years would be important to our future, and for several weeks, those new services became our only business model. How can a business prepare for an event that has no equivalent? In such an unprecedented situation, I cannot claim answers, but as a garden retailer, this is what I have discovered thus far:

1. Become abundantly clear on your values. Crisis quickly clarifies values, but we shouldn’t wait until adversity to determine what guides our hardest decisions. Aspirational values are wonderful on paper, but authentic values are the ones we actually live, especially when it is most difficult.

2. Do what you don’t have time to do. Short-term immediacy and long-term priority create a tension that retailers must carefully balance. Necessity and urgency catalyze remarkable innovation, but as we now work to recreate our retail experience, we need to take time to develop longer-term solutions that meet the changing needs of our teams, our customers and our businesses.

3. Diversify your revenue streams. When the doors of our retail store temporarily closed, we moved quickly to create curbside service and online sales. Our legitimate reasons for not previously developing those conveniences simply vaporized! As we recover from the repercussions of COVID-19 and adapt to an altered retail reality, garden centers would do well to continue to diversify and improve the functionality of new sales avenues.

4. Cross-train your staff. Conserving one’s expertise is a route to irreplaceability, but it is not a path to business security. COVID-19 exposed the structural vulnerability of any retailer that rises or falls on only a few people. We

invest in our future when we disperse our knowledge, train staff for multiple roles, and empower capable and willing team members to lead.

5. Create a team of contributors. Contributors take initiative, suggest solutions and own outcomes. In a culture of contribution, every staff person is a difference-maker who gets to leverage their unique skills, talents and abilities toward a shared goal. Regardless of role, contributors stand on equal footing together, each owning their part of the solution.

6. Engage your staff in decision-making. By honestly discussing both opportunities and challenges with our team, we can generate shared ownership of shared answers. Staff engagement then drives implementation, improvement and results.

7. Plan to be surprised. Too easily, we categorize our colleagues by their particular role and apparent disposition, yet crisis often obliterates our neat assessments and leaves us amazed by the people standing ready, strong and capable before us. It doesn't need to take a crisis for us to see each other more clearly and to let each other shine in new ways.

8. Cultivate unity. Our business is only as strong as our team. Teams are actively created, made and remade by daily successes and failures, conflicts and resolutions, and problems and solutions. When we work to unite our team and to elevate their value, we increase the resilience of our business.

Adversity offers a gift that we may not find in prosperity. As we continue to forge forward as individuals, families, teams, businesses and communities, may we remember what we are now learning and apply that wisdom to the clearer days ahead.

Back at my keyboard, I brushed away my tears and finished the day's message to our brave team at Tagawa Gardens: "You are our people. You are our heartbeat ... We will face down this deep challenge together and overcome it. We are rooted together in this same garden that has sustained us and sustained our community for 38 years. Thank you so much, to every one of you."

Meet the 2020 Judges:

Bill McCurry—*Green Profit* columnist and owner of McCurry Associates consulting firm

Kate Terrell—Store Manager of Wallace's Garden Center in Davenport, Iowa (and a former YRA nominee)

Danny Summers—Executive Director of The Garden Center Group

Madison Williams—Co-owner Boulevard Flower Gardens, South Chesterfield, Virginia & 2019 Young Retailer Award Winner