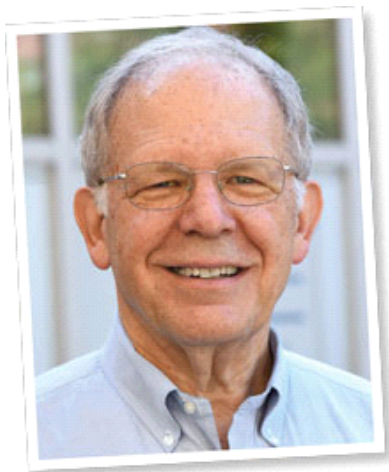


3/1/2021

Be Careful What You Wish For

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We all want the pandemic to end. We can't wait to return to "normal." Consider what you're wishing for.

If you or someone close to you were victims of the coronavirus, your perception of 2020 will be different from that of the average garden center operator. We empathize with your painful memories.

If the health of those near to you wasn't impacted, you likely saw the pandemic as stressful, but economically advantageous. (There are exceptions, like those with a significant event, decorating or cut flower departments.)

Over the past year, customers flocked to garden centers as a place to celebrate nature while fleeing their locked-down homes. It was also a place where some socialization (at 6-ft. distances) could happen. Garden centers

were fun to visit. Our industry was exposed to more new customers than ever before. The common question wasn't, "How much does this cost?" but "Do you have what I'm looking for? If not, what's the next best thing?"

Many retailers cut their open hours with beneficial unintended consequences. The fewer hours assured their "A-Teams" were always on duty giving the finest customer service possible. There were always seasoned managers around because the shorter hours reduced scheduling hassles.

Where are these new pandemic customers getting their dollars to spend? Most came from each household's discretionary spending. There has been minimal traveling or eating out. Gym memberships have been canceled. Movies, concerts and sports are a memory. Even driving kids to school stopped. Many households had "extra" money, some of which found its way to garden centers.

When COVID-19 is a memory, demands on discretionary dollars will increase. The airlines and cruise industries expect, when travel seems safe again, millions of pent-up passengers will immediately buy tickets.

When the pandemic hit it took months to implement things like curbside pickup, sanitizing, social distancing, etc. How long will re-adjustment take when it's over?

Will customers demand longer hours or will they just naturally go to whichever retailers are open evenings and weekends when they aren't working? Will we ever see them again if we don't return to longer, pre-COVID hours? How quickly can you adjust and cover an expanded work schedule?

Because customers were more forgiving, some retailers may have adopted lazy or bad customer service habits. Will customers remember their lackluster pandemic service instead of the high standards that were their pre-COVID hallmark?

Is on-order inventory going to keep your customers excited about visiting you again or will they find the same old pansies and petunias? Will you have demonstration gardens or inspirational displays that instill peace and tranquility? Will you present engaging events so exciting your customers will say, "I'm glad I came in today"? Will those customers check out with carts full of exciting products?

Consider doubling down on the trends that new customers embraced, like indoor plants or fresh veggies and herbs. Use email, social media and events to engage and inspire new customers who discovered you during the pandemic. Show them new, fun, engaging products, and provide helpful gardening and cooking tips. Do you have social media posts encouraging store visits to see something more exciting than a cut price on a stale product?

Eventually the lockdowns will end. Someday we'll be able to throw away our masks. Be ready for the changes that time will bring. Just as the pandemic thrust us from full speed to shutdown in a matter of days, the ramping up again may come rapidly and without much advance notice. It could come more from a public tired of lockdown as much as it could come from governmental mandate. Start planning today how you'll handle the next "new normal." **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.