

Features

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Driving Sales Through Relationships

Jennifer Polanz



Between the COVID pandemic, global supply chain issues and a huge increase in new gardeners, retailers really had to work hard to keep product coming in and benches stocked. It wasn't lost on our three essayists and award nominees just how much they relied on the relationships forged with suppliers to get through this crazy time. For the essay portion of our award process, we asked them to talk about their strategies for making these bonds stronger, both with vendors and the customers they serve.

As we do every year, we'll be announcing our 17th Annual *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Winner at the Unplugged event at [Cultivate'22](#) in Columbus, Ohio. This year the event is back at Gaswerks (where we were last year) from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. on Monday, July 18. Join us to meet these fine three young retailers and chat with them in person!

Meet The 2022 Judges:

- **Bill McCurry**—*Green Profit* columnist and owner of McCurry Associates consulting firm
- **Kate Terrell**—Owner/President of Wallace's Garden Center in Davenport, Iowa (and a former YRA nominee)
- **Danny Summers**—Executive Director of The Garden Center Group
- **Wyatt Page**—Garden Center Assistant Manager, Gill Garden Center + Landscape Co., Corpus Christi, Texas & 2021 Young Retailer Award Winner

Question: Long-term business relationships and loyalty drive our industry and have for generations. What are some specific strategies your business has implemented to create and foster strong relationships with your suppliers and customers?



Casey McCollum

Age: 26

Title: Owner

Operation: Plant Perfect Garden Center, Bismarck, North Dakota

Relationships are a key part of any business in every industry and garden centers are no exception, especially in our current market. When I purchased Plant Perfect in 2020, my relationships were my most useful tool. I was close with my staff, the customers I served, the local community I was a part of and the vendors I was purchasing from.

Strong relationships with our suppliers are as important today as they have ever been. In 2020 when I took over, the industry was in a unique position.

We just came off the biggest year in garden center history. Demand was at an all-time high and supply issues had just barely started to set in. Fast forward through 2021 and the beginning of 2022, demand and sales are continuing to climb. Supply shortages and freight issues are becoming more difficult to navigate and having solid relationships with our vendors is crucial.

Traditionally at Plant Perfect we've relied on a small network of vendors to deliver season after season. Over the last couple years, that network has grown substantially. With supply chain problems, we need multiple options for every department and product. When one vendor falls short on availability, we need to have a second, third and fourth option for filling those gaps.

At Plant Perfect, I find it crucial to build strong connections to help navigate through supply issues. The best way I do this is to be an easy-to-work-with customer. Paying on time, getting to know reps on a personal level and being flexible when issues arise help to create a win-win relationship. Being proactive is also critical. Working with vendors in advance gives both parties opportunities to find solutions, save money and save time.

Communicating and networking with other garden centers is helpful. They've made referrals to new vendors and at times shared freight to help save costs. This has made logistics easier for the suppliers. Industry peers also offer great new ideas to engage customers.

Our customers are everything and building relationships with them go beyond a first-name basis. Since taking over in 2020, I've put the customer experience at the top of Plant Perfect's priority list. Our garden center experience is the reason customers come to us. We've worked to become a more community-focused business, which means offering more events and workshops to engage and educate our customers. We work together with area businesses, create fundraiser opportunities for our communities' organizations, donate products to silent auction fundraisers and say yes to every opportunity to engage with the community.

This spring, we put on our first Gardening Saturday event. It's an entire day of customer education, hands-on workshops and we even invite other small area businesses to set up booths showcasing their products. It's a great way to bring your customers together and get everyone excited for the upcoming growing season.

One of our most successful customer relations events we've done for two years now is the late-night plant party where we open our store back up from 8:00 p.m. to midnight. The night is filled with giveaways, food, drinks and free plant bingo in the greenhouse! Hundreds of customers line up at the doors and enjoy an experience you won't find anywhere else.

Our advertising has taken a turn. We don't run ads that push big sales or promotions. I've found it makes customers not trust our everyday prices and gives the customer the wrong perception of why they choose to shop with us. We

run ads that educate our customers while promoting the gardening community and our company culture. We receive lots of positive feedback because our customers find this information useful, relatable and memorable.

When you give to your customers, they almost always come back to you. In 2020, shutdowns caused a complete cancelation of all our Easter wholesale orders. Instead of throwing thousands of Easter lilies away, we encouraged our customers to help us spread joy by picking up a free lily curbside to give to a friend. Our social media post went viral and two lines of cars stretching a mile in each direction blocked up the main highway. These customers didn't forget about their free Easter lily and showed back up in the garden center for us that spring. This was a valuable lesson on the power of a strong relationship with the communities we serve.

Maintaining customer loyalty is important. This means more than a simple rewards-based loyalty program; it's about things that truly create loyal customers. Driving customer loyalty isn't just elaborate events or costly promotions; it's incorporating simple ideas like adding a handwritten thank-you letter to our customer's garden rewards mailings, hosting plant swaps, and giving educational tours to student groups and organizations. It's the little details that keep our customers choosing us.

Good quality employees relate directly to a strong customer relationship. At Plant Perfect our work culture is second to none. We're a tight-knit group and we have a low turnover rate. We run a laid-back work environment where most of our employees are seasonal or part time. Labor shortages are everywhere and our staff chooses Plant Perfect because it brings them the most joy. Although we work hard, we're easy to work for. Happy employees make happy customers and long-term employees build long-term connections with those customers.

My goal is to maintain a fun and memorable experience for our customers and suppliers. Being innovative will allow Plant Perfect to be an industry leader.



Ashleigh Munro

Age: 32

Title: Garden Centre Coordinator

Operation: Kiwi Nurseries, Acheson, Alberta, Canada

In the retail world there are two external factors that play a critical role in our overall success as a business. Building strong relationships with our suppliers and our customers is key to the growth of our brand, and reputation as a trusted staple in the community.

It's important to remember that suppliers also are running a business, therefore, our success in turn makes them succeed. When inventory is limited, suppliers have to make the tough call regarding who they'll sell their product to. Being a good customer means being loyal, transparent and having open lines of communication. It's also imperative that invoices are paid on time. When we place an order, we ensure that our requests are straightforward and that at least the minimum order is placed. Consequently, if we have questions or concerns, we ask for help and are open to the solutions provided by our suppliers.

Taking the time to get to know the various sales representatives is very important to us, as it helps us to build mutual trust and understanding. When a problem occurs with an order, following the supplier's procedures to correct the issue is critical. Mistakes happen and following the proper course of action makes it easier for both parties to correct the error.

Due to the current economic conditions, it's quite common for shipments to be delayed, orders to be only partially available or shipments to be canceled altogether. This news is typically delivered to us by our sales representative. In these situations, we're accommodating, respectful and reasonable when working with them towards a solution. This cements our strong relationship with the sales representative and their company.

We value the delivery drivers' time and make them a priority. Delivery drivers love coming to our location because we get them unloaded fast and we're happy to provide them with a coffee while they wait. In addition, we also offer them a place to park overnight, if required. Even if they're going to be late, we still prioritize them and ensure that we unload efficiently and effectively, getting them back on the road quickly.

Ordering and receiving stock is the first battle; the second battle is getting customers to come to your location. Our marketing strategy is primarily event and experience based, with a strong emphasis on children and families. When children are entertained in a safe environment, parents are given an opportunity to relax and are more likely to return for other events or just to shop. This marketing strategy targets parents, grandparents and children, creating a strong brand loyalty for years to come.

Our farm animals both delight and allow opportunities for education. We frequently receive feedback that children ask their parents to come and see us solely to interact with our animals. The wonderful thing about children is that they share this news with everyone, helping us to bring in even more customers.

During the summer, we run our "Kids at Kiwi" program, which isn't only affordable, but offers insight and education. Each year a different theme is chosen for the summer classes; the themes have included fairies and dragons, bugs and birds. No two classes are the same, allowing for repeat customers and for children to learn about a variety of topics, which keeps them coming back for more.

We're known in our community, as we stay involved and work with a variety of non-profits and local organizations. Our annual events include an Easter egg scavenger hunt, our craft beer night, the haunted trail and our Christmas walk. We strive to make each event unique and true to our mission of making nature part of life. By partnering with local non-profits and other organizations we're able to reach a larger demographic, expanding exposure for both organizations and creating a positive experience for our customers.

Twice a year we host a fundraiser. Our fundraiser makes it easy for the coordinators to promote their online shop with a portion of the proceeds going back to their organization. The customers then come directly to our location to pick up the order. We reach thousands of new customers each year and build credibility in the community this way. This also gives the customer a feel-good moment and a reason to visit our store. This past year we've also started our "Plants for Seniors" program, where customers can buy a plant through our fundraiser supporting their local organization. The purchased plant is then donated to one of our partnering senior homes. This exchange brings joy to both the individual purchasing the plant and the senior who receives it, while also supporting the client's organization and our business; thus benefiting four different parties. Seniors are often a marginalized demographic and it's important to us that we're able to give back to the seniors in our community.

We have a reputation for being honest and knowledgeable. A key component of our business is putting education and knowledge over making a sale. If a plant isn't right for our client, we tell them the truth and will make alternative, more suitable recommendations. We strongly believe in only selling what's needed and what will survive/thrive in our climate. While this approach may seem counterintuitive, this leads to the greatest success for our customers and helps them to build confidence and find joy in gardening, while also increasing their trust with us, their service provider.

We encourage questions from our staff. While we believe in thorough training, it's impossible for someone to know everything. Consequently, we tell our staff that it's okay to not know the answer, as long as they seek to find it.

Without our suppliers and our customers, we wouldn't have been able to grow into a successful second-generation business, therefore, fostering and maintaining these strong relationships is pivotal to our success.



Will O'Hara

Age: 33

Title: *Perennial Manager & Garden Mart Buyer*

Operation: *Van Wilgen's Garden Center, North Branford, Connecticut*

Relationships are the foundation of every facet of small business operations. From day-to-day customer interactions to large-scale buying and selling of plant materials, hardgoods and soils, not a single transaction happens without some measure of trust being placed by or into someone. Generational success can only come from generational relationships and improvements built over time.

Van Wilgen's Garden Center has always placed the highest priority on maintaining and growing relations with our neighbors, both in business and in sales, and has managed to reap the rewards of that commitment for over 100 years. It's no understatement to say that without our core partners and repeat customers, Van Wilgen's would not be a fraction of the business it is today.

Very few things can be directly linked to success and growth quite like positive customer interactions and relationships. We strive to provide a customer experience that isn't predicated on sales, but rather education and service. Contrary to the old adage, "The customer is always right," we endeavor to provide the customer with the right plant for the right place, even if that means saying no to a sale. The customer's long-term success is the most important facet of the interaction.

Our customer loyalty program, like many, encourages second visits through the use of non-expiring points that give discounts on future purchases. In order to encourage the use of this program, we offer several weeks a year where double points are earned, which both offers greater discounts for the most loyal customers, and encourages third and even fourth visits over the course of a season, all while never tying the company down to a rigid schedule based around profit-losing sales. We also stick to a very broad interpretation of our two-year warranty policy on all trees, shrubs, perennials and roses, ensuring that the customer never feels as though we're trying to prevent them from receiving a replacement.

Intrabusiness relationships are a key factor in the continued growth and development of the Van Wilgen's business model and brand. We firmly believe in the power of our own name and our Van Wilgen Grown brand, and are lucky enough to work with local and national businesses that also believe in us. In 1992, Bill Van Wilgen launched our Van Wilgen Grown brand, growing annuals and perennials in pots either with stickers or custom designed with our own logo on each pot. This has evolved in the last decade to now include our own labeling on organic rooting stimulants and slow-release fertilizer.

Just this past year, we've expanded our relationship with our local mulch supplier even further by custom branding our bags with them as well. We've begun to include Connecticut-produced and milled mulches, as well as our own custom planting and potting mix blends. This line includes a mulch that we as a company first requested they produce, as well as a garden soil blend that we came up with in-house and brought to them.

By continuing to build our brand through local relationships such as these, we ensure that the name Van Wilgen's is

always synonymous with gardening in our community. With that long-term trust built in our name, we're also able to leverage it to sell more products from our local suppliers, helping to ensure that they, too, remain a vital part of the supply chain and our local economy as a whole.

Likewise, having a solid rapport with our plug and finished plant vendors is vital to the continued success of our company. Our top three finished plant vendors all live within 50 miles of our farm, including our own growing department. Being committed to growing our own plants and buying local whenever possible ensures that we have the fastest possible turnaround for customer requests, as well as the least possible lag time on our restocks.

For our top vendors, being this local allows them to visit more frequently, seeing their plants in the retail environment and how the retail crowd reacts to their branding campaigns and marketing. We also have a phenomenal relationship with their growing departments, suggesting plant varieties to them over the years that they didn't previously grow, only for those plants to become top sellers. We often invite each other's staff to participate in company recreational activities and team-building exercises, to speak on each other's panel discussions and provide input on long-term supply goals.

By continuing to push forward in the ways above, Van Wilgen's is doing its best to ensure that the relationships we have with our customers and partners in business continue to grow and evolve, year after year. As we push into our 102nd year, we continue to be defined just as much by how other people interact with us as our own actions themselves. Looking to the future, those very interactions and relationships are not only the things that define us, but will be the things to help us become better and better year after year. **GP**

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