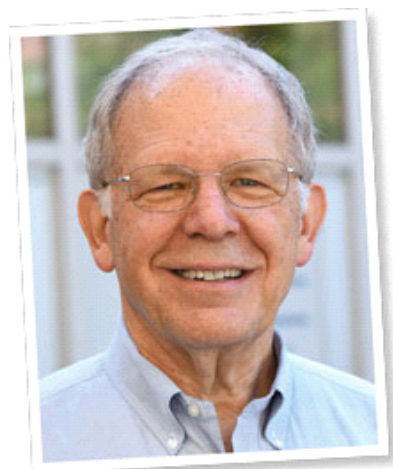


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Young Retailers Exploit Customer Service

Bill McCurry



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Consumer spending on activities is on the rise ([Green Profit, June, 2022, page 40](#)) and astute garden centers are upping their game with fun customer experiences.

The best part of my business year is when I'm privileged to interview the three finalists for the Young Retailer Award. All three emphasized the importance of engaging customers beyond product and price. Each recognizes independent retailers will never consistently win the "lowest price award" and each overcomes that with superb products and inviting facilities.

Casey McCollum (Plant Perfect Garden Center, Bismarck, North Dakota) describes his garden center as "a place that's essentially as close as you can get to a botanical garden for North Dakota. It's hard to pass up that experience just to save a couple bucks."

Joint events with other local businesses make independent garden centers unique, while cross-pollinating their customers with patrons of other establishments. Casey was motivated to do his first event to help a local brewery owner who fell ill.

"We took soil, plant mix, pots and moved it all to the brewery," he said. "Drinks and plants went over very well. The tickets sold out within a few hours with everybody asking, 'When are you going to do the next one?' I'm sure we could sell a couple hundred tickets. It was a unique experience, only available through Plant Perfect Garden Center."

Casey recently hired someone whose partial responsibility is private event planning. Food truck events are becoming very common among independent garden centers. Experiences range from one truck each weekend to multiple trucks offering wider culinary opportunities.

At late night Plant Parties, Casey offers free bingo and other events. Hundreds show up, fill the parking areas to capacity and have a great time before wandering around the garden center and buying the irresistible plants on sale.

Casey said, "They play bingo for an hour and then get up from their chairs to start spending money. The more you

engage with the community and the more you give to them, the more that will come back to you.”

Further north, Ashleigh Munro (Kiwi Nurseries, Acheson, Alberta) offered a two-day craft beer event. They invited 24 local breweries, along with food trucks, to provide samples as a fundraiser for community events. Plants were also sold during the event. An unofficial observation showed the more beer people sampled, the higher their average purchases. Customers were entertained and felt they were contributing to a worthy cause. New customers found the experience at Kiwi Nurseries something they wanted to repeat.

Ashleigh’s mantra is “making nature part of life.” That can mean sending kids home with a pea or bean in a cup to watch it grow. At the Easter scavenger hunt they hand out sunflower seeds. In the fall, a photo contest chooses the tallest, ugliest and otherwise weirdest sunflower grown from those free seeds. While there, the kids can visit the unofficial petting zoo with chickens, ducks, butterflies, roosters and goats.

Supporting local charities makes customers feel good while helping those in need. Will O’Hara (Van Wilgen’s Garden Center, North Branford, Connecticut) asks customers if they would like to round up their purchase price—say from \$23.45 to \$24.00—with the spare change going to local food banks or other charities. They’re then told that Van Wilgen’s will match every penny donated. Will says it’s common to have customers add even more money to make the donations especially impactful.

Will rejects the historical premise, “The Customer Is Always Right.” He says, “The customer may not be right, but they have to leave happy and, when applicable, better educated. When you ask, ‘What can I do to make this right today?’ it diffuses a potentially acrimonious situation. The customer moves from irate to conciliatory. It’s a positive experience for customer and staff alike.”

The industry’s future is in good hands with these young retailers who deliver value along with unique experiences.

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Bill McCurry would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 731-8389.