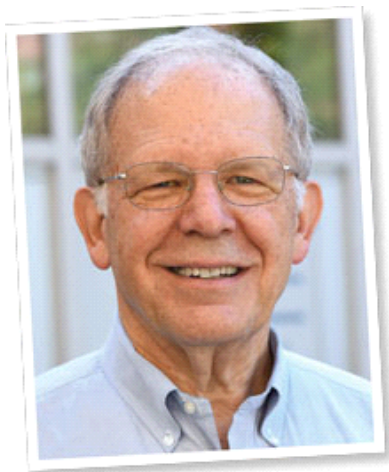


1/1/2023

## Identifying the Real Problem Part 1

*Bill McCurry*



*Bill McCurry*

There are conflicting forecasts for 2023. One trend everyone agrees on: Consumers will pay for and want to participate in experiences. Are you adjusting your event schedule accordingly?

It was shocking to hear a successful garden center owner say: "The best thing about COVID was it gave us an excuse to cancel our classes." After recovering from this surprising sentiment, I asked, "Were customers asking about classes?"

"Oh, yes. We had daily requests."

"There's Zoom. Why cancel classes?" was my obvious inquiry.

"Everyone here hates public speaking, myself included, so we happily canceled them."

There are few marketing answers that are only right or wrong. In this situation, the garden center is **WRONG**. To solve a problem, you must identify it. To the owner, the "problem" is public speaking. **WRONG** answer! Communicating with customers who want to hear from you—in many cases are paying to hear from you—is not "public speaking." It's having meaningful conversations to help friends improve their gardens. They don't expect Stephen Colbert to entertain them. They're seeking honest communication with people who care about gardens and their success.

Help your team get experience on sharing their expertise. Ease your people into conversing with groups. Start with each person giving a brief report at each team meeting, then provide opportunities to talk to slightly larger groups. At your next class, introduce your employees to the audience and have them briefly talk about their favorite plant and provide a related gardening tip.

The best speaking advice I've received was: "If you don't have some anxiety before you start, it means you're dead. Go home! The key is not the absence of butterflies, but getting the butterflies flying in formation." You want to do a good job for your customers. Of course, you have some nervousness. It's okay. Even when I'm talking to groups I've worked with for years I'll try to find a spot backstage to jump and stretch before I start, just to bleed off the nervous energy. It's natural, so use this nervous energy to your advantage.

This month, I'll give you four of the most impactful tips I know. I'll finish the list next month. These work for me and can work for you.

- Short introductions are important. Have someone briefly introduce you and mention how the audience will benefit from the session you're providing.
- Forget imagining the audience naked. That ancient advice never works and can be disconcerting. Instead, use the four "F words"—Find a Friendly Face Fast. Scan the people who came to learn and focus on those who're giving you positive reinforcement through their eyes, body language and smiles. Their energy will energize you. Forget those with their arms crossed. Their negative attitude will impact everyone who sees them, so make sure you don't look at them. Their decision to have a bad day shouldn't detract you from helping those who want to hear what you have to share.
- Don't bluff or try to be someone you aren't. The people you're talking to don't expect the Garden Guru. If you're asked a question and aren't certain of the answer, your best response is, "I'm not sure. If you'll give me your email when we adjourn, I'll research it and get you an answer."
- Carefully handle the grandstander. Occasionally, you'll find someone who thinks they know it all and wants to "Stump the Star." Again, focus on the people who came for your knowledge and help. Invite this grandstander to make an appointment with you or someone else in your garden center for a more private, in-depth discussion of their issue after the event. It's unlikely they'll follow through with that because their unspoken goal is only to be recognized as a genius by your audience.

These tips are just a start. Next month I'll give you six more skills used by successful teachers and moderators. **GP**

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*Bill's buying your coffee at MANTS (Baltimore, January 11-13)—He'll share the upcoming business trends he sees and ask about your "off-the-record" thoughts, along with suggestions for future columns. To set a time and place to meet, call/text (609) 731-8389 or email at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com).*