

# Controlling the Customer Experience



By Stan Pohmer

It's a very rare occasion when I can walk into a retail establishment of any kind and feel and experience a strong enough emotional connection that entices me to want to commit two of my most precious possessions, time and money, in them.

I'm as time starved as most of you are, and, though I'm a student of retail and always examining them to see what makes them tick, I'm normally pretty unimpressed with retail stores, resulting in my spending as little time as possible (as a consumer) in them and buying only those items that were on my list when I walked in the door.

But when the retail magic does happen, and all of my senses are engaged, my emotional needs met, the authentic story ... the brand ... is effectively and convincingly communicated, and all the elements that make for a positive experience are delivered, I willingly open my wallet, spend time browsing and seeing what else might be available for me to purchase; and as I leave the store, I'm looking forward to returning again for a repeat performance.

Sadly, these great retail experiences are few and far between, which makes the great ones even more special and memorable.

## People, Place, Product, Process

Studies have shown that a customer makes a first impression of the store that affects his/her "intent/tendency to purchase" within the first 20 seconds of entering.

Think about the best supermarket you've ever visited or shopped. The best of the best bombard all five of your senses (smell, touch, taste, sound, sight) as soon you walk in, with the wafting smells of fresh baked goods, bright floral displays, full displays of colorful and fragrant fruits and produce, and the glass cases full of fresh salads and specialty foods.

It's all orchestrated to put you "in the mood" to explore, experience and purchase within 30 feet of your first entering the store, and it works.

Connecting with customers and delivering a positive experience isn't something that mysteriously occurs on its own. Rather, it's deliberately orchestrated and directed, integrating all of the individual components into a total experience, which can then be replicated and repeated over time to help establish a positive expectation.

It's a combination of people, place, product and process, all both individual and inter-dependent that come together in a way that is superior to your direct garden center competition, as well as other retail venues.

One of the key elements of an exceptional customer experience is to create an authentic and realistic brand story that can be weaved into every component of the overall experience and every customer interaction.

If done effectively, this serves to set you apart as unique and fascinating from other retail experiences they encounter, a differentiator that transcends price value.

## All Five Senses

In a recent blog, noted speaker and author, Doug Stephens, stated that, "Truly remarkable customer experiences are deliberately engineered to be:"

- "Engaging" — connecting to all five senses to create long-lasting memories
- "Unique" — incorporating methods, language and activities that are unusual and surprising, authentic and naturally related to your brand in the customers' minds.
- "Personalized" — they make the customer feel that the experience was created specifically for them. This could come from taking the time to provide specific solutions to their individual problems or concerns, or by giving them a detailed landscape plan for them to consider, as examples.

- "Surprising" — provide something that's unexpected, something that delights them, leaving a lasting impression. It could be something as simple as providing a glass of cold lemonade on a hot day.
- "Repeatable" — they're executed using prescriptive methods to achieve a uniform level of consistency and excellence, practiced so they appear spontaneous and leaving nothing to chance, while affording enough flexibility to allow your staff's individual personalities to show through.

Retail is quickly being driven into a bricks-and-clicks world, storefront and Internet. Initially, it was an either/or option, but it's now forcing the evolution of brick and mortar stores into becoming omni-channel retailers playing in both worlds.

Yes, garden centers must quickly start to ramp up an online presence in order to be competitive.

But there's also a tremendous opportunity for the physical garden center to create its own relevance in the bricks-and-clicks world by creating and delivering outstanding customer connections and experiences that can't be replicated in an online platform.

We deal with products that have strong emotional appeal to them, and all five senses can become engaged with them. If given the right opportunities, customers can relate to them ... and your brand ... and leave with outstanding experiences that will entice them to returning.

But exceptional customer experiences don't just mysteriously happen by themselves; they are planned, practiced and executed, controlled by you and your team ... **LGR**

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