

through the trees

Customer service is key. We hear it all the time, and you probably drill it into your employees on a daily basis. On a recent trip to Costa Rica, I, however saw firsthand that it's more about the customer experience as a whole, with customer service being just one main component.

On the first day of our trip, we decided to do something that's been on my bucket list for a while: zip lining. We picked a company by the name of Sky Adventures. It was a few dollars more than other companies, but it had a professional website and rave reviews online, so we decided it was worth it.

When you're nearly 700 feet high, flying up to 60 miles per hour on a cable, it's easy to justify paying a bit of a premium for what you perceive as greater expertise and safety.

The day was wonderful, the views were breathtaking, and the guides were who made the entire experience. Levi, Fernando and Cristian were with us from the minute we put our harnesses on until we were back on solid ground two-and-a-half hours later.

They explained safety thoroughly, could speak English, French, and Spanish to communicate with everyone in our group of eight people, rode down tandem to help one woman get over her fear, and most importantly, made sure we had fun.

I recognize that this adrenaline-focused experience doesn't have much in common with shopping for plants, but hear me out.

For an extremely crowded business with hundreds of people there when we arrived, I remember the names of three of the people that worked with me and felt I had a personalized experience. That's something that would be nice when shopping.

A study by consulting firm Walker predicts that by 2020 customer experience will overtake price and product as the key brand differentiator.

When talking with Brian Damron of Swansons Nursery in Seattle, Washington, he kept putting an emphasis on customer experience: being sure you look good for customers on both a Friday afternoon and a Monday morning; marketing to get bodies in the store then making employees aware it's their job to make sure they have a good time; and offering not only the plants for a certain price but also sell the Swansons' expertise that comes with it.

Read more about the customer experience at Swansons Nursery on page 20.

Then, flip to page 38 for one of three edible gardening-focused features in this issue. Mark Highland, "The Organic Mechanic," gives ideas for organic offerings at your store, and he also notes the importance of a positive customer experience and making shoppers aware of what "more" you do at your garden center.

Some examples of "doing more" he gives are growing food for a local food bank, having strong core values or giving back to the community in some way. He notes the importance of transparency and communicating your work to engage with your customer base.

don't forget

You have until June 22, 2018, to submit your entry to become Lawn & Garden Retailer's 2018 Merchandiser of the Year. Find all the details on page 49, and you can see past winners and enter at www.lgrmag.com/merchandiser-of-year.

Also, turn to page 14 for some merchandising inspiration in Christina Salwitz's column this month. She headed to Ravenna Gardens in Seattle, Washington, and shares with you a number of tips she found from walking the small, yet very impressive, garden center and snapping dozens of photos.




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