

# Three Things ALL of Us Need



By Christina  
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**T**oday put the “burned” in “burned out” for me. It’s not that it was hard, or even overly difficult in tasks, co-workers or dealing with customers. It was that my brain is simply overloaded on the bad behavior of “those unaware” among us who live their lives blissfully ignorant or simply willfully indifferent to others.

I think Mother Nature knew what she was doing when she decided to make us slow in the heat of spring and summer. I’ve been working almost seven days a week since the snow melted and I’m just too hot and tired to come after stupid people this month.

Minor first world issues though they may be, yet a few experiences solidified my 5 p.m. wine choice today, so I thought I’d share. I’m choosing to believe that it helps me to have the proper perspective on why we’re all in this business and why we continue in the face of such trying days. (Not the wine, that just keeps me from being “stabby” at dinner.)

## What Are You Seeking?

I keep reading the same signs and signals from all of you out there as well. Whether you’re the owner, manager or industry newbie at an independent

garden center, we’re all looking for a few things in our daily lives.

At times the oddballs among us tend to magnify what’s wrong with “those people” and we can easily get anesthetized to these basics:

1. ALL of us want to be seen as a co-equal human.
2. ALL of us want to be heard for our knowledge and/or educational background, our acquired years of expertise and gained experience.
3. ALL of us want to be valued and respected, and to know that we matter.

In the vast numbers of wonderful customers out there, something about the heat seems to make some people a bit nuttier than usual. So, you figure that it’s about an 80/20 split, right? Eighty percent of our customers are easy going and wonderful enough, the other 20% make you want to physically remove their driver’s license, voter cards and send them to “Extinction Island” (if you’re not a Survivor watcher, look it up!). Sometimes you can only shake your head and wonder how they made it out the door in the morning.

## Red, Red and More Red

Today was one of those days. I have not yet come to make peace with the role that box stores have to play in my frustration, but I’m trying hard daily. For example, I have a design client whom I will simply call the “Red House Lady” who insists on all things red in her container designs. Maybe a touch of white or a small accent of chartreuse but her wants consists of red, on red, on red. All shades, all styles, ALL RED. Sounds like it could be a fun challenge, right?

My first year doing this for her, I was amused by the task and had fun while making about \$1,200 on the job. The second year, she decided to paint her 30-inch-wide, dark pots with interior house paint, a screaming bright fire engine red which began peeling off immediately, not to mention the fact that she had added pond inserts (with spillways) to the inside of the pots as liners because her old, now painted pots no longer had bottoms!

Sigh .... moving on with said formerly fun project to year three. “Can I have all 15 of my pots done for \$800 including tax in the next two weeks?” she asked.

As I looked at scheduling the job for the coming days and tried to make the budget math work, I texted the Red House Lady to confirm the schedule and to my glee, she said had done them herself, admitted they looked terrible but was in a hurry. I’m considering that a bullet dodged.

Yet, the takeaway for me was not losing the job, or even potentially a disappointed customer. It was that as I shopped for a particular specialized tool at the box store, I was glancing at some fairly stunning combos that arrived fresh off the truck for \$50. There is no way I can replicate that look for that price — no way, no how. You and I both know that it’s likely she went to that same store and decided she could do it cheaper herself.

Even though she admitted that her containers looked terrible, she had to admit that she saw value in what I provide and wants me back to do her winter pots. We’ll have to address that idea at a later date. But the point is that the client was more invested in the “just get it done” idea than the idea that a designer provides a custom look, tailored to specific requests and budgets, no matter how wacky and weird.

Do we help that customer find value in what we do versus the perceived value they get from a cheaper plant elsewhere? Does the box store make them feel heard? Do we actively promote how much time and effort we invested in our years of education and knowledge?

**In the Box Store, Take Two**

When I needed a flatbed cart at the box store, an employee with an empty cart was walking past me, I reached out and asked if that cart was available since almost ALL of them were loaded with dump or plants to be stocked (a huge no-no where I'm from!). He waved me off and said this cart was "his" and I could find one over across the parking lot. Retail 101 tells me this employee should not be interacting with the general public.

Since I've now had three interactions at this box store being treated incredibly poorly by those making sexist or just plain rude comments, I can't be the only one experiencing this I'm sure. However, from the standpoint of being cheap and convenient for what I needed to get when I needed to get it, I have had to put up with this bad behavior. I've reported it both privately and publicly with tags and hashtags. So, it's not as if I'm condoning this experience by staying silent.

If it is happening to our own customers who frequent these same box stores too, then why are we still not getting the respect we deserve when IGCs offer our customers top notch service, selection and value? Are

**Are today's customers just willing to put up with shabby service to get a good deal?**

today's customers just willing to put up with shabby service to get a good deal? Of course, they are!

Are we taking the brunt of that bad service when they take it out on us at the IGC as they demand you let them in 20 minutes before opening or ask for a quantity discount and then buy the plants down the road at our competitor? Or when they behave badly trying to get prom photos?

**A King's Ransom**

Lastly, here's one more example that fits the theme since this was all on one day. On my way home tonight, I had to stop for gas at the last station before the freeway on ramp. It's the last bastion of legal hostage taking when they can charge whatever they want for gas because they know you're desperate.

Yet when the station is fully packed and one car is

parked between two pumps, I watched as cars circled and circled and circled for one of those two spots while the driver texted on her phone, stunningly oblivious to the chaos around her. It occurred to me that this crazy busy gas station could make way more money by having someone literally direct and monitor the traffic.

It also occurred to me that the gas station owner was also equally complicit in his not caring because he was making so much at the pump that civil behavior and valuing his customers wasn't enough of a priority for him. They will continue to circle; and the lady will block another pump somewhere else.

Even though we vent, and whine and wish we didn't own these problems as we do in this industry, I try to make a point of remembering why WE bring the value, why WE care enough to ask the tough questions and why WE try so hard to value and respect each other.

Our business is important even though the box store or gas station may hold us hostage from time to time, I'll never forget why I do this job. I bring the value, I bring the service, I bring the skill that makes customers feel like they are respected and matter! 🌸

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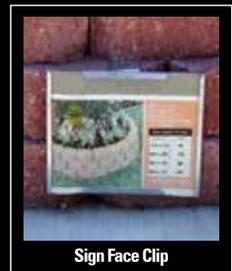
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